

University of Windsor

## Scholarship at UWindor

---

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Theses, Dissertations, and Major Papers

---

2000

### The Schizophrenic Virgin (Original writing, Short stories)

Dean Michael Serravalle  
*University of Windsor*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/etd>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Serravalle, Dean Michael, "The Schizophrenic Virgin (Original writing, Short stories)" (2000). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 4256.  
<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/etd/4256>

This online database contains the full-text of PhD dissertations and Masters' theses of University of Windsor students from 1954 forward. These documents are made available for personal study and research purposes only, in accordance with the Canadian Copyright Act and the Creative Commons license—CC BY-NC-ND (Attribution, Non-Commercial, No Derivative Works). Under this license, works must always be attributed to the copyright holder (original author), cannot be used for any commercial purposes, and may not be altered. Any other use would require the permission of the copyright holder. Students may inquire about withdrawing their dissertation and/or thesis from this database. For additional inquiries, please contact the repository administrator via email ([scholarship@uwindsor.ca](mailto:scholarship@uwindsor.ca)) or by telephone at 519-253-3000ext. 3208.

## **INFORMATION TO USERS**

**This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.**

**The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.**

**In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.**

**Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.**

**Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.**

**Bell & Howell Information and Learning  
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA  
800-521-0600**

**UMI<sup>®</sup>**



# **THE SCHIZOPHRENIC VIRGIN**

by

**Dean Serravalle**

**A Creative Writing Project  
Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies and Research  
Through the Department of English in  
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
The Degree of Master of Arts in Creative Writing at the  
University of Windsor**

**Windsor, Ontario, Canada**

**2000**

**© 2000 Dean Serravalle**





National Library  
of Canada

Acquisitions and  
Bibliographic Services

395 Wellington Street  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

Bibliothèque nationale  
du Canada

Acquisitions et  
services bibliographiques

395, rue Wellington  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

*Your file Votre référence*

*Our file Notre référence*

The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

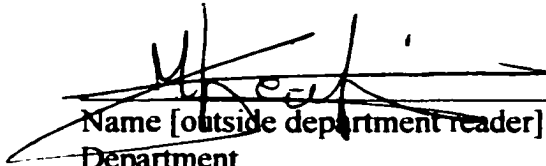
L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.


0-612-52660-7

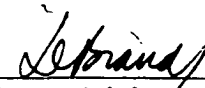
**Canada**

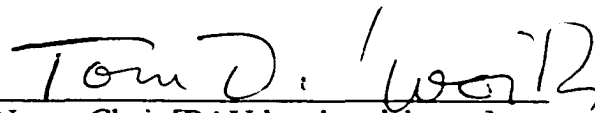
**APPROVAL PAGE - Master's**

APPROVED BY:

  
Name [outside department reader]  
Department

  
Name  
Department

  
Name, Advisor

  
Name, Chair [BAU head or delegate]

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iv
CHAPTER	
PROLOGUE	1
The Schizophrenic Virgin	4
The Constellation of Scorpio	35
The Dragon and The Indian Princess	63
Jordan Donne	79
Mr. and Mrs. Angeli	90
A Part Time Job	115
Hutch The Horse Jockey	120
Gabriel's Wreckyard	133
The Inability to Say No	140
Dufferin Island	145
Daredevils	155
Karaoke Night	165
The Cave of Winds	180
Attic Diary	191
Grapes From The Vineyard	210
Halloween	229
EPILOGUE	243
VITA AUCTORIS	247

## ABSTRACT

The Schizophrenic Virgin is an experimental look at how stories interrelate and “congeal” to form one. Each chapter is in the semblance of a short story. The point of view changes, while characters reappear to continue their development and growth through the eyes of another. The intended effect is to show the realism of the present with an undercurrent of history, myth, hearsay, folklore and fiction. The story is set in Niagara Falls and revolves around an historical stone brick building at the cliff of the escarpment overlooking the great and infamous cataract. Niagara Falls is renowned for its beauty, majesty, commercialism, honeymooners, tourists, daredevils, death, and above all else – the extraordinary. The Falls itself is a natural phenomenon, which refuses to be capitalized upon, but it is nevertheless exploited. It is a place rich in history and abundant in character. The plot centers on a Michael Angeli, a young man coming of age who is imprisoned by familial duty, and Scorpio, a schizophrenic, who is in search of a daughter he believes to have fathered. Both characters meet each other by chance when Michael and his brother Gabriel postpone their lives to live their father’s dream of opening a bar/restaurant. Ironically, the bar is a renovation to the old building atop the escarpment, and dramatically, it is the stage from which each story is performed.

## Prologue

It was once the home of a medical missionary whose fraudulent practice almost got him hanged over The Falls, mid 18<sup>th</sup> Century. He was a tall, thin Loyalist with spectacles and an idea. He lived alone in an old stone-brick building at the edge of the escarpment. In late autumn, early winter, he would leave his tiny castle, walk across a golden moat of fallen maple leaves, descend a rock stairway, and find himself next to a torrent of falling water. He was a rock collector by hobby. But on one day in particular, he had found something special, something to sell. It was a white, grainy rock which he claimed was "congealed mist." The very next day he hammered a wooden sign at the foot of the slate walkway to his home. It read in hurried paint, "Congealed Mist From The Bottom of The Rainbow Cures Sores, Festules, and Ulcers." A mixture of the mist from The Falls and the magical rainbow, he proposed to every visiting patient, created the healing rock. His name was Christian Fitzpatrick, and he abandoned the building to save his life.

Within the same building, almost two centuries later, a Michael Angeli prepares to write two letters. He is in a hurry to leave. The woman whom he has recently fallen in love with prepares herself in the bathroom. He looks for paper to write on. He can't find any so he is about to tear two printed pages from the Bible - The Bartender's Bible.

On one of the pages is written,

### ***Floating Liqueurs***

*Creating a rainbow effect in a glass with different colored cordials requires a special pouring technique. Simply pour each liqueur slowly over an inverted teaspoon (rounded side up) into a glass: Start with the heaviest liqueur first. Pour slowly. The rounded surface of the spoon will spread each liqueur over the one beneath without mixing them. You can accomplish the same trick using a glass rod. Pour slowly down the rod.*

He feels the instruction is of no more use to him so he tears it and writes over top, in bolder ink:

*Dear Scorpio,*

*I write for fear of never seeing you again. It's a possibility I'm fighting not to accept, especially tonight.*

*The bar is closed, for good, and I sit at its funeral. I sit on your stool, amidst the candles I left to burn out on their own, amidst the silence that set the stage for our friendship.*

*I took for granted our last good-bye. Improper good-byes do little to resolve a story without an ending. I had assumed you would come back. But you didn't. And now it's too late for you to return to this place, this bar, where you felt at home. How I miss you like family. How I wonder whether you allow yourself to feel the same. How it hurts me to think that you don't care.*

*It's a risk trying to remember you. I must admit. I hold what you were to me like a drink I'm trying not to spill. Careful not to upset your memory. Careful to walk the fine line. I have found her. Or rather, she found me looking for you. The daughter at the cliff of your broken heart. She is beautiful, more telling than even you can imagine.*

*Yesterday we talked with you in common at your favorite spot - at the edge of the escarpment overlooking The Falls. We watched the seagulls gathering and fighting amongst themselves, like your many personalities. We watched them fly into nature's trap, in and out of the rising mist, or rather, the warm illusion it creates. Some gulls fall fated to frozen wings, you once explained, others, likely dismemberment in the Whirlpool below. Still others plunge willingly into dangerous waters, rushing waters, falling waters, in search of further challenges for their survival. It's the risk they take to be allured by the phenomenon. She wants to know the truth. I want to fall in love.*

*But I don't want to tell her those words just yet. We need to find you. So I am leaving this note with a nurse at The Old Folks Home across the street. Should you happen to return and we're not here, please wait for us. I promise I'll take care of you, the both of you. Maybe not here, but somewhere.*

*Michael*

Michael folds the letter and writes Zachary Simms on the front. He stuffs it in his pocket. He then tears out another sheet. It is a colorful picture of an array of wine bottles floating on a bed of grapes. Below the picture is a list of the best wine regions in the world. An area close by, Niagara on the Lake is listed as one of them. Michael smirks. He writes overtop the picture.

*Gabriel.*

*I know you will find this tomorrow when you drop by to clean up. Don did not arrive with the cheque tonight. He didn't even call. I am leaving for a while. I have to find someone with Marie. It's important enough to leave right away. Tell Mom and Dad*

*I'll let them know where I am. I'll be moving around a lot. I left the cash we made last night in the secret hiding spot. I took two hundred for myself and I left you the rest.*

*I love you with all of my heart, Gabriel. And I love Mom and Dad as well. But I have to go. I've fallen for her and I couldn't let her leave without me. I hope you understand.*

*Michael*

Michael folds the letter and writes Gabriel. He slides it under a glass on the bar and looks into the beveled mirror. He sees disfigured faces in the beveled grooves that are not his own. He wonders whether his brother will ever find it in his heart to forgive him for abandoning the family. He hears the creaking of the bathroom door open. She is ready. His broken image lingers on the mirror like a lie unforgiven, like that scratch on the same mirror he could never hide.

## **The Schizophrenic Virgin**

Michael had always carried his fears and memories together, in the same paper bag.

The time his family went to Niagara Falls, just a five-minute drive away, to spend the day. Michael was ten years old. His mother had dressed him. She had let him wear his favorite jean overall shorts to trick him into wearing those shiny black dress shoes from his First Communion pictures. They squeezed his toes to a point and scraped blisters on his heels. On his face, he could still feel the warmth of the slap he had received from his father for refusing to wear them. Angry and pensive, Michael daydreamed himself lost, amid a throng of Chinese tourists in straw hats. They marched along the winding sidewalk, which bordered The Falls, like a foreign army about to invade. They laughed and jeered at his tearful requests for his parents. Michael couldn't find them, wherever he looked, and his parents couldn't hear his voice cracking screams. The thundering hum of falling water crashing against rocks nearby drowned him out. A closer, accented voice asked him to keep it down. The colored man with the square hat wanted to take a picture of his frozen family in peace.

Another softer voice asked Michael if he needed help.

Michael stared at this balding man, who had pulled his rust spotted Firebird up to the curb. Michael had been warned in detail by his paranoid mother not to talk to strangers. Strangers took you away, chopped you up, and left you frozen in a freezer. But this man's interest in him mesmerized Michael. So did the rosary dangling from his rear view mirror. Michael slowly limped in his stubborn shoes toward the car. The man behind the wheel was alone and naked inside. He was sweating. Below his sagging breasts and the glistening curls on his chest, and barely wrapped around his wider waist, was a leafy newspaper - smeared ink.

"Come inside, everything is going to be all right."

Michael never looked back as he turned and disappeared once again into the crowd of tourists. He ran and tripped, gurgling the salty tears that streamed down his face, until his father scooped him up and assured him he was found.

Never had Michael known a fear so great that it could tear through that paper bag and spill every memory he had ever collected – until now, ten years later.



Michael shook without notice. He shook like a wooden puppet forced to perform as a human for the first time. He shook and stared at the slow trickle of blood leaking from his father's left ear. Groaning. A sexual moan. Michael listened more closely. He listened to the aphasic groaning emanate from his father's breaths, hoping to hear a broken accent.

His father had fallen. Or so it seemed. The sprawled out posture of a middle-aged man with an overgrown belly lay supine on the cement floor of his uncle's garage. Michael recognized the man to be his father. He recognized the long, pointed nose he had not inherited from him. He recognized the thick brown hair and the matching tanned skin that he had. He recognized the decorations, his father's gold chain, his father's gold ring and watch, all tacky to Michael. His father's clothes were all too familiar as well. He preferred the dressy silk sweaters hemmed with an elastic. The sweaters had to be light enough not to make him sweat, and fancy enough in the collar so that he didn't need a tie. They were always doused with too much scent, but they were soft to the touch.

Michael recognized everything, but the voice. His father was trapped inside. His calls for help unclear. His language too foreign for anyone but an angel to understand.

Michael blinked and focused on other, surreal details, which created the illusion that his father might have been dying: his father's flickering eyes, gray specks in his father's neatly trimmed beard, maroon blood from a black and white WW2 movie, the pink slippers on his father's feet. They were his aunt's, Michael assumed. Michael noticed skin nearby.

It was his father's naked Achilles heel beneath the gravitational pull of dress pants slipping to the knees. It rested on the main suspect in this tragedy - the first step to a door outside. Beyond that door, and the windowless garage doors, was an expanse of crystalline trees, slowly frozen by the mist of that great cataract in the distance, Niagara Falls. On damp winter nights like this one, it would appear that rain fell from the trees themselves, like hesitant, mistimed tears. Like the individual tear that parachuted onto his father's lips. It failed to wake him up.

His father had left the head of the dinner table for a butt. He hadn't returned within the three-minute time he usually took to inhale one back. No vestige of a cigarette anywhere. No aftermath of smoke.

Moments earlier the shrilling, unintelligible shrieks of Michael's mother would invite everyone to experience one of those unforgettable movie shots. The shot that leaves a little boy walking out of the theater with a gassy feeling in his stomach. The shot that leaves him wondering whether the character in the movie really died that horrific death, or if the character will survive if the little boy allows himself not to believe in endings; or if he allows himself to believe in miracles, like the possibility of peace in a dysfunctional family.

The plan was to celebrate Christmas. But it was already three weeks into January. Why Christmas in January? It was an attempt by Michael's uncle Tony, his father's youngest brother, to save a back stabbing family from implosion. This stringent, unforgiving Italian family had been fucked up for years because this same uncle Tony had left his clean and proper Italian wife to have an affair with a villainous home wrecker, who, coincidentally, was not Italian. Michael's grandmother had managed to call her more impolite names than home wrecker, in a more old country, cursing, wish you were dead way. Michael's grandmother would ridiculously justify her curses by claiming that this "other woman" had ruined her family by tempting her youngest, most beloved son with a drink. Her baby son could do no wrong. Her son was the mythical Adam, this other woman, a thin, contemporary version of Eve with too much makeup, and her long, youthful legs, the serpent.

So, before Michael's family stepped into the warmth of a finished basement heated by a steaming kitchen, Michael pondered how the belated celebration seemed too perfect. It seemed too perfect a way to make up ten years of bad mouthing, bitter values, and familial condemnation, in one night that wasn't even Christmas. The gifts his mother had brought did even less to bring back those special times lost. But the expected characters were there, not to Michael's surprise. In attendance were his two overly obese aunts, whom Michael hadn't seen in over a year and a half because they were too jealous of his father for making a clean success of his life. Notably absent were their children, Michael's cousins, whom he hadn't seen since jail stints and cocaine adventures made

them figures worthy of gossip; and Michael's aunt, his uncle's former Italian wife, who, it was learned afterwards, was circling her former husband's house in tears with her daughter. They missed dining on lamb. They missed toasting homemade wine. They missed Michael's father leaving to smoke away the mixing aftertastes. Right after that mistimed commercial break his father fell.

It was freezer cold in the garage when everyone rushed out of the stuffy basement. It was too easy finding where the echoing screams of a frightened wife originated. His father didn't move much on the pavement as Michael and his brothers, and his father's youngest brother, rushed to the spot. Michael reacted slower to the moment than the others. They beat him to the kneeling position by his father's side. And as they lifted his father's head from the pavement, Michael flinched back from the smeared presence of more blood. Once revealed, the slick of blood seemed magnetized to Michael's feet. He tripped back to avoid contact with its viscosity. Michael then noticed the intricate designs of the hose like dress socks he was wearing. They were his father's. And it was his father who insisted Michael wear them that night.

Michael had put the socks on to keep the tenuous peace between them. Michael had worn the stupid socks in a bid of support. He knew that his father didn't want to attend the evening's festivities and was nervous about doing so. Even though his uncle had made the obvious mistakes, Michael's father was always made to feel the subtle blame by his family. Their mother had canonized her youngest son, and Michael's father was always Cain. Michael felt sorry for his father when his father offered him the socks, a few hours prior.

His father sat alone on his king-sized bed, almost vulnerable in his underwear. He was squeezing the socks in his thick hands when Michael strolled in to borrow the better hair dryer. At the time, Michael anticipated that his father would want to secure an ally before they reached the familiar battleground. Giving his son a pair of socks was just the kind of way his father could avoid a confrontation with him, and at the same time, establish a truce strong enough to support him for the night. It was then and for some untraceable reason, that Michael told his father, rather arrogantly, that he was lucky his son was on his side, always. Up until that brief conversation and for months at a time.

they never spoke, colliding whenever they did, the both of them too stubborn in their ways.

But how would Michael be able to say sorry to a man who couldn't hear his thoughts, not now, not before, perhaps not ever? How would he be able to apologize to a man who was being helped up to the sitting position by his uncle, and by his two younger brothers, while he simply watched, like he was the youngest? In Michael's periphery, his uncle's toys glowed at them under the florescent lights in the garage: his uncle's motorcycle, his uncle's sports car, his uncle's tools, his uncle's little tractor, the calendar exposing a near naked girl hunched over the fender of a car advertising tools.

In the background as well hovered Michael's aunts, who were literally pulling out their hair and repeating, "Oh my God! Oh my God! Why Victorio. Not Victorio." Michael wondered why some things have to happen so quickly. Demons certainly charge a scene. And his family's demons were certainly as present in the air as the mist of concerned breaths in the cold.

Michael hated himself for already seeing the "now" as the writer he wanted to be would, as symbols, metaphors, similes, or ironies. He couldn't help it. He was an observant interpreter. He had always been. So as he watched the characters in his family drama pace and wail around, he likened them to crows, while he stood still like a scarecrow, numb.

More like lambs, he thought, they confusedly surrounded their stricken shepherd. Soon, they would scatter into separate cars to follow the ambulance to a university hospital, an hour's drive away. Even in the ambulance, his father would lead them. Michael deemed melodramatically.

Fragmented moments before, Michael remembered himself like an out of body experience trying to perform his first miracle. He had finally found a voice in an attempt to seek a response from his father, one that would assure everyone that everything could return to normal just as quickly. His father answered him with an orgasmic groan. Michael trembled at the sounds of sirens approaching, and shivered at the encroaching thoughts that he might lose him.

When Michael stepped into the damp, cold car to drive his brothers to the hospital, he didn't cry. He was holding back the waterfall within, as unnatural as it would sound to him in one of his short stories, but nevertheless accurate. His mother was ahead of them in the ambulance, with his father. Her black hair almost covered one of the back tiny windows.

Michael tried to keep steady on the road. He locked his arms so that the wheel would stay straight. He forgot his jacket at his uncle's. So did his shivering brothers in the backseat. He watched their innocent, puppy-brown stares in the ice scratched rear view mirror, cry the tears he held back. They looked so much like their older brother, Michael noticed. Their hair was short and parted to the side to imitate his. Their trembling lips resembled his when he cried as well. Michael wondered whether they expected their older brother to soak those tears with a confident hope. He wondered whether they expected their older brother, the once reclusive Catholic with a history of holy certainty, to say that everything was going to be all right. He should have known. He was closest to God. They spoke on the phone all of the time, except that Michael had been ignoring His phone calls lately. Impeccable timing. Only controlled breaths escaped him to relieve the amassing emotion about to precipitate tears. Silent highway winds. The pumping sounds of the accelerator decelerating. Timed intrusions of light.

Michael was so afraid of blame. And he was not arrogant enough to confess to his brothers that it might have been his fault. That night he was supposed to leave the festivities early to meet this girl he had been using like a broken toy, for other things. She was under the illusion that he loved her. He had called her earlier from the privacy of his uncle's good kitchen upstairs. He assured her, while he played with fake fruit in a bowl, that they would talk about their "relationship" - what she was determined to call it. But little did she know that Michael was devising an elaborate lie. It would allow him to obtain the carnal pleasures he was now interested in, having repressed them for so long, without the commitment she required not to feel "dirty". She was a nice, stupid girl, and he was prepared to take advantage of her because he was too proud of himself for being able to pull it off. When his father fell, and they were on their way to the hospital, his plans had been fatefully thwarted. Michael fought not to think of having sex with her for

the first time that night, or the possibility that God was punishing his once faithful altar servant for showing such disregard for an innocence lost.

Not soon enough, everyone relocated to a little closet, perhaps a former office, just outside the swinging doors of the emergency room. They awaited a doctor, awaited a word of assurance, awaited someone to wake them up from the nightmare. Michael's shrunken mother got the only chair and the rest stood shoulder to shoulder. Michael's eldest, younger brother, Gabriel, who was taller than he but could pass for his twin in countenance, slunk on the wall and buried his face in his hands. Gabriel had unfortunately inherited his father's longer nose. Michael's youngest brother, the acclaimed basketball player who was away on scholarship but home for the fake holiday, tried to stand up strong. Brian had unfortunately inherited their father's small build. He was too emotional to stand upright. So Michael worked against the grain of himself to make up the difference of fleeting strength - for everyone, but especially for his mother, who was rocking with a blank stare in the uncomfortable looking chair.

Michael scanned the room to see his chubby uncle with head bowed, playing with his mustache. At that moment, Uncle Tony looked young enough with fear to be a brother of his. Next to him, stood Michael's hair pulling aunts, who looked old enough with wrinkled concern to have just got off the immigrant boat. Next to them, only blank pink walls. Nothing to help him hold it in. Nothing to distract his attention from the tears about to spill over. Michael left the room and no one said a word. They didn't even notice him leaving.

Michael walked by a number of pain stricken patients who were waiting against the overcrowded walls of the hallway leading up to the emergency room. Broken arms. Sick babies. An old lady got a bed by the wall where she was turned in the fetal position, while probably her grandson attempted to accost an overworked nurse. Michael walked right by them and to the waiting room where a black and white TV, high up and in the corner, lit the room like a projector. Katherine Hepburn, Cary Grant. The title, *Bringing Up Baby*, signed across the screen in fifties movie fashion, before the program went to commercial.

Michael took a seat near the pop machine and picked up a magazine, as if he would only be there temporarily, and he was pretending to waste time. The rumbling of

the pop machine hummed in competition with the grating sounds of the TV. Michael descried two despondent souls falling asleep in their chairs, twitching as if victimized by the invisible germs.

Michael. The English Lit Major, tried to read but he couldn't even look at the pictures. He could only think, and think to a time not so long ago, when all seemed so promising, the real Christmas Eve, when his father had rushed home to announce that he had a surprise for the entire family. His father, the entrepreneurial genius of the family, had purchased a piece of land within amazing proximity to one of the greatest wonders of the world - Niagara Falls. The city of Niagara Falls itself was a perpetually growing, heavily saturated, tourist area, with increasing potential for profit. His father was excited. There was money to be made and he was the one who was going to make it. Michael remembered that day so fondly.

Michael leaned on the peach porcelain sink in the good bathroom upstairs, his usual retreat when he had nothing to do. With the lights off, he stared into the oval mirror, the one that made his head look longer. He was deliberating whether or not he should pop the pimple on his forehead. Michael wondered when he would age. He was still twenty-one. He had successfully continued the ten-year tradition of parting his short, dark hair, neatly and normally to the side. He had a baby-face complexion that made him look more like he was sixteen, and the black olive eyes that made him look more like he was twelve.

In a blur caused by the grumbling of his hungry stomach, he saw in a flash that twelve-year-old boy who used to visit the same bathroom to whip himself into sanctity. Michael would wait until he was alone and only after he had prayed his third rosary of the day. He would walk into the bathroom, in front of the same mirror, pull his shirt off, view the skin and bones, take the belt from his pants and slash his back. He did this until his father caught him one day and beat him for it. But Michael wasn't about to stop whipping himself into sanctity until he overheard his father yelling at his mother for projecting her fanatical beliefs on their son. It wasn't her fault. It was Michael's need to find a way to be special.

Michael often wished he were something more than the English Literature Major in his final year in university, who often pondered an uncertain future. He never gave weight to any decision. He feared to commit himself to anything permanent. It was difficult to find something he could dedicate his entire life to. He had often thought of entering the Seminary, except he had already considered himself a religious burnout. He seemed to do things to the extreme in this area as a young boy. When he was twelve, he prayed the rosary five times a day in an attempt to secure the power to perform miracles. When that didn't seem to work, he skipped playing marbles and flicking hockey cards, to read the entire Bible, front to back.

Michael considered writing as a living, but realized how difficult it was to live as a writer. "Words are not bread," his mother would preach in his grandmother's way, although Michael wasn't planning to eat his own words. He was planning to do something "worthwhile of his voice," or so advised his horoscope that day.

So, Michael adjusted poses in the mirror, almost daring one of his selves to appear and take charge. He heard the honking of his father's car horn outside. Michael rushed downstairs and his father rushed through the front door in a sweat - a small, chubby, middle-aged man with a neatly trimmed beard. Always well dressed, but always out of shape, his father breathed heavily as he tried to control his excitement.

"Everybody in the car, now, hurry up!" he exclaimed in his broken Italian accent, his voice descending to a cough, and to what residual tar there was left in his throat from the cigarette he probably just butted out.

Within minutes Michael's two younger brothers, his mother, and him, were dressed and packed into his father's smoky Cadillac, as they so often did on past vacations. Almost habitually and in anticipation of his father lighting another cigarette, Michael and his mother rolled down their windows. The both of them despised the dangers of second hand smoke, and the stench it produced with the leather seats, although they often tolerated it without complaint. So, with the predicted spark of the match, and the shift of the gear, Michael's father slowly accelerated on his way to the neighboring city of Niagara Falls, the honeymoon capital of the world.

As expected, Michael's father took the scenic route because he loved to drive. Although excited about this new "surprise," Michael knew that his father couldn't resist



the temptation of driving his family around in his beloved Cadillac. To his father, it was a symbol of his success. to everyone else, a boat on wheels.

Oversimplified to Michael was his father's character, which he considered wooden. His father was a provider - in every traditional sense of the word. He felt that his patriarchal duties stemmed from his ability to make sure that his family was provided for financially first. Michael remembered many kitchen table arguments where everyone would complain that he didn't spend enough time with them. His father would always say, "Come on! How many fathers give you what I give you, a car to drive, a nice house, food on the table...etc." Michael had heard the same excuses a number of times, and he was not prepared to think that his father was above anything else but mortgage payments, water bills, lots that could make money, and the occasional joke without a punch line.

The cacophony of sounds from the only Italian station on the radio reduced conversation to a minimum in the car. Michael's father was a man more inclined to do than say any ways, a quality Michael admired in him and regretted not to have found in himself. In the time Michael usually took to think things through, his father would have already done it. But a different kind of excitement muted his father today, although no one seemed to mind or prod away at him for details. His father's business ventures had become a common phenomenon, garnering little interest, and less suspense over the years.

Michael's father kept driving closer and closer to The Falls itself, and Michael wondered how much closer this land actually was to the natural phenomenon. His father drove right up to the edge of the escarpment that almost overlooked the raging Niagara River. He then made a right, upriver, and down a street populated more by strip joints than people. On this particular street the few pedestrians that paced about were the usual suspects to negligence. A gypsy-looking woman was picking weeds from the corners of crumbling old apartment buildings, perhaps hoping to find enough for a salad. Another old man in an overcoat and glasses seemed to solicit the street for an unsuspecting teenager - an obvious attempt to arouse a passion in him long lost. When Michael was a child, and his family traveled more often together, he used to peer out of the back window of his father's baby blue Lincoln. He used to speculate as to the lives of the people on the street. What they were thinking, who they were expecting, whether they

were hungry or thirsty, did they dislike the taste of dry chicken like he did, or were they starving for a companion. Michael had made a game out of it. Unfortunately, the game had matured to the point where those speculations had become introverted, and more serious, instead of playful and imaginative.

They continued further along the edge of the escarpment and Michael observed how distasteful some parts of Niagara Falls remained, how old and grungy some streets appeared and how quickly one street changed in personality from the next. One minute they were driving down a street lined with decrepit pawnshops. The next, they straddled one that supported gigantic commercial hotels. There were no shortages of hotels, motels, restaurants or bars in Niagara Falls, Michael concluded. For decades, millions had visited Niagara Falls annually and even more now were visiting due to the legalization of gambling, and the recently built Casino. The Casino did well to compliment a border city already notorious for its illegalities and daredevils. Michael smirked. Gamble your life away, then drop yourself in the Falls. A perfect match.

They crossed the spectrum of this chameleon-like city to reach the other end, opposite from where they started - the site of a remote religious habitat. Across the tracks from this religious retreat that housed a convent, a large rectory for priests, a tiny little church, and a cemetery, was the land Michael's father now owned. On that land, and almost welcoming them, was an old stone building which resembled the ones across the tracks. On first notice, it seemed as though his father had stolen something from the church. Michael would never get an explanation of how his father had managed to snag a piece of prime real estate atop the escarpment, with a clear view of the great and famous cataract. Never had Michael seen the Falls from such an open perspective. And so close was the land situated that Michael could feel the omniscient mist from The Falls sheathe his leather jacket. He marveled at the clear view of the rainbow created by the mix of this silvery mist and the Sun, and stood awestruck at the roaring sound of 379,000 tons of water pouring in torrents over the horseshoe cliff.

It was a fantastic view indeed, although Michael showed little emotion to his father about it. It was a pattern in their way of being. Michael seemed to condemn his father's conquests, perhaps because his father would gloat about them more in his direction than any of the others. At times, Michael felt that his father competed with his

firstborn, and Michael disliked the position this put him in. Having immigrated from Italy at a very young age, his father worked like a slave, without any support from his family, to become a very successful businessman. Michael was proud of his father, but his father always felt, more because of Michael's education and his own lack thereof, that he could never measure up to his son. Ironically, Michael felt the same about him. Perhaps his father felt inferior because often, as a young child, Michael rebuked him for not being "good" enough. When Michael was going through his "I wanna be a saint" phase, they argued constantly then, every Sunday at lunch. Almost always, it would turn into a religious debate where Michael denounced his father for not accompanying the rest of the family to church. Michael realized that it was his father's only day off, and that his father could barely understand the English sermons, but this didn't stop him from attempting to save his father's soul, and at the same time, prove his father wrong in some way.

But his father would strike back, and more now that Michael was old enough to take it. What Michael took to heart more than anything else were the comparisons his father made between the two of them. Often, and in front of other people, his father would repeatedly remind Michael that when he was Michael's age, he had already been married, started a business, and was expecting his first child. And of course, he did all of this without anyone's help, only emphasizing further Michael's dependency upon him. This unnerved Michael the most, maybe because he feared venturing out on his own.

His father stepped out of the car, but left it running. He then spread out his arms, as if in victory, and asked for Michael's opinion first. Michael took this the wrong way, as if his father meant to rub it in again.

"What do you think, Michael? Good enough for you?"

"It's all right."

Michael's lack of excitement disappointed his father, and this showed on his father's face. It was cruel of Michael to ruin what was another accomplishment for him. Michael would hate himself the entire way home for offering the wrong impression. Perhaps he was indeed jealous of his own father.

As for Michael's two younger brothers, they wanted to see inside the old, gray, stone building on the lot. Covered in wilted vines, and against the backdrop of a cliff

disguised by tall cedar trees, it resembled more a haunted house with its boarded up windows, and large cedar door.

Shaking his head so that Michael could see his father's disgust with him. Michael's father took the keys out of his pocket and proceeded to open the door. His father grew silent when he was angry, and Michael awaited any word to make sure of the contrary. That word luckily came, although his father spoke more generally to all of them. He explained his reasons for buying this particular piece of land. His intentions for buying the land made Michael feel even more horrible.

"This piece of land is for you-guys. And when they put the new Casino in, it will be here. I bet you anything. It's gonna take care of all of us."

Michael couldn't disagree with his father's point, no matter how hard he tried. The government regulated Casino that presently existed in Niagara Falls was only a temporary one, although the most successful of the others in Ontario and Quebec. This piece of land was the perfect place to put the permanent one, and rumors always circulated that the government was searching for an ideal spot overlooking The Falls. The lot itself was large enough, Michael thought, and perfectly in line with the cliff of The Falls. It supplied an extraordinary view, although Michael wondered aloud what his father would do with the insignificant building that presently rested upon it.

"Dad, what about the building?"

His father grew excited again now that Michael had shown interest. This was evident in his father's rushed tone of voice, and how he tried harder to work the key into the frozen lock.

"The building - it's gotta go. Not now, bello mio. I no think they put the Casino until next year." He finally snapped the old lock in.

"What are you going to do with it until then, Dad? You're going to leave it empty?"

"I don't know, maybe I rent it, but it's a old, look.."

His father punched open the door and a cloud of dust exited out and into the cold winter air like the building had been holding its breath. Parting the air with his thick hands, Michael's father entered first as the rest followed him in, coughing.

While old and dirty, the once abandoned place still allowed particle beams of sunlight through its two arched windows at the front and back. An albedo glow from the snow outside entered in behind them to light the dormant building. With a little work, it could have been cleaned up and used for something, Michael surmised. Almost stealing this train of thought from his mind, his father had an idea come to him as well.

"You know, this is a good size for a bar or ristorante, it's got a big kitchen. And over there, you can put a bar, some tables." His father stopped to think more seriously about it while Michael's mother politely disapproved.

"Honey, you're busy enough already. You don't need to open a bar."

"Why not?" Michael's father snapped back. He was the kind of man that preferred to be on his own when it came to his ideas, and he often mirrored the opposite of what others suggested in an attempt to secure this individuality.

"Why not?" He repeated again almost to point to the foolishness of his wife's disapproval. "It used to be a bar long time ago. And I have a lot of friends who would come. I'll get a good cook, and a nice looking bartender, and maybe we can make some attention for the land."

Michael's father thought he had the perfect plan, and although Michael didn't take him seriously at the time, his father went through with it. Within a month, the place was cleaned up, his father had a friend build him a beautiful oak bar, the necessary equipment was ordered, and then, well then...

Michael returned to the non-fiction of the present, and that awful night, where he happened to see a small Pakistani man who looked too neat and organized in his buttoned up lab coat to be someone not important. The man walked by Michael in a straight line, not even realizing the purgatory on his way to the room where Michael's family and relatives sweated in hell. Michael pulled himself up to follow the surgeon to the room. He snuck in behind him once the man entered and discerned for himself that the woman sitting down was the distraught wife. He didn't care that she was anybody's mother. He had seen too much, saved too much, and was immune to something so arbitrary, like pain.

"Missus Angeli, I presoom." His accent was strong.

Michael's mother tried to stand but found it difficult to do so. Michael's brother Gabriel helped her up and allowed her to lean against his broad shoulders.

"My name is Dr. Ready. You're husband has suffered a fractured skull and..."

"Oh my God! Oh my God!" Michael's mother reacted, while his brother attempted to steady her from collapse. She unintentionally interrupted the doctor and this somewhat annoyed him.

"Missus Angeli, please! Your husband has suffered a closed brain injury and he has a blood clot that is growing. It is the size of a golf ball right now and we will monitor him over night to see if it grows any further. If it does, we will have to proceed with surgery."

"Oh Victor!" Michael's mother couldn't control her grief. This lack of self-control tested the surgeon's patience. Realizing that he had no more information to offer, he turned to leave the room. He faced Michael with a stern, almost "bored with the monotony of this ritual" look as he did so, before Michael's mother stopped him again.

"Doctor, doctor. Is my husband going to be all right?"

"We'll see if he survives the night."

He barely turned his head.

Everyone in the room stood stunned, while Michael's mother continued to wail. "We'll see if he survives the night? What the fuck is that," thought Michael. He felt like he should have stepped up and knocked that smug little surgeon in the head to put him in the same position, and maybe, just maybe, he wouldn't have talked so cruelly, so unmercifully, so objectively. Michael hated the surgeon already. How could such a cold man be tending to his father?

Shortly thereafter, Michael's family, and its appendages, switched venues to congregate on the third floor - intensive care. Now nearly 2:30 in the morning, the lights in the waiting room where everyone tried to sleep were off. The passing headlights of cars on the bordering street spotlighted different spaces on the wall, as if to search for the actor to perform the soliloquy.

Michael's throat was dry and he was cold again. He left the room and wandered out into the clean and silent corridors. Fluorescent lights made the passageways appear like roads to a better place, except that there was no better place on this floor. He walked

by the burn trauma unit and wondered to the injuries within. A silence iced the area like the shiny buffed floors. Michael strolled around two or three more corners and reached a hallway of assembly cases and class portraits. A hall of fame on the most infamous floor of this university hospital.

Michael lurched slowly to surmise the class portraits of various men and women who attended medical school there. He was trying to find a new doctor for his father, like he could have chosen one off the shelf in a grocery store. The pictures went as far back as the sixties, when there appeared to be less students graduating. Class of '61. Class of '62 and '63. The pale faces in these black and white portraits appeared solemnly intent, sophisticated, confident that they could change something. Very few women back then. Very few men as well, as some portraits boasted only five to six doctors. And that's when Michael found his father's doctor, Dr. Ready. The little man attempted to stand upright and taller in the photo. Next to him stood three other similar looking men, and one child.

Michael moved much closer to the portrait to get a better look at this apparent prodigy, who barely fit the lab coat he was wearing. He looked misplaced, although he wore a most arrogant and proud smirk that the others couldn't emulate for the camera. Michael read the names, his, Dr. Natas Fauster. It sounded so much older than him. Where was this man now? Michael wondered. This is the man whom he wanted to save his father's life, this genius of a man who looked further from error than the right answer. He must be working at the hospital as well, Michael tried to convince himself. Dr. Ready was still there. Where could he find him, Michael paced in circles thinking. What could Michael have done to assure his mother of something his once impenetrable faith was having problems with, the certainty of his father's survival.

Michael continued to walk down the hallway with a determined pace, and turned down a hall of offices. He didn't see the name there, or on the board downstairs that listed the doctors in residence. He only saw at the top, head surgeon, Dr. Ready. Michael soon forgot the name of Dr. Natas Fauster like a song he hadn't heard in a while, but nonetheless could repeat every line to when heard again.

Michael made it back to the waiting room and things remained the same. dark. Ten minutes later. Dr. Ready flipped the light switch on and everyone stood at attention. like soldiers at a boot camp.

“We are going to have to operate...”

Michael’s mother was too tired to wail and everyone was too shocked to come out of character.

Five months later. Michael’s father lay still in a hospital room. surprises in his condition dripping down faster than his IV. His father had undergone brain surgery to remove a blood clot from his brain. He recovered adequately in the mental department. Unfortunately. he fell victim to unusually rare complications while he was in a coma. “Complications.” for choice of a better scientific word. was a safety net for doctors when they couldn’t find the balls to say that they fucked up. or so an embittered Michael believed. “Complications” was an excuse to put a man through a hyperbaric chamber under the pretentious diagnosis that a mysterious “air.” not damage to his spinal chord. was causing his father to be paralyzed from the waist down.

Michael and his family visited him every day. the hours drive to the hospital resembling one to the corner store for milk. Body of water to the right. Lines of factories to the left. Follow the yellow slashed road.

They. now a team of doctors. assured Michael and his family that their patriarch would be moved shortly to a nearby rehabilitation hospital. where he would spend another three months before coming home. That was another hard to swallow word for Michael. “rehabilitation.” like his father did something wrong. Like it was up to his father to atone for the mistake.

During that time of extended crisis. everyone in Michael’s immediate family sought the opportunity of giving back to their father. in their own way. Michael quickly understood that he was not the only one who was completely dependent upon his father for everything. And so. when the opportunity arose to carry his father for once. he quickly joined his brother Gabriel in a proposition that was destined to attract his father’s disapproval.



Very nervous, the two of them rehearsed what they were going to say to their father on the long drive there. But when they finally arrived, Michael got stage struck. Call it nerves, call it walking into a lobby where a young girl, who was crippled from the neck down, was trying to sell a smile to her concerned family, but Michael lost his breath. Trying to hide the panic from Gabriel, he silently followed his younger brother and the scent of visitor's perfume to the elevator. The doors closed and Michael stood a little behind his brother, like they were polite strangers. They ascended floors, computer digit by computer digit, as Michael noticed the stylish scar he had engraved on the side of his brother's neck. What a nasty scratch! Michael worried, as in days past, if his father would notice. He worried that his father might have guessed, upon seeing the scar, that they had fought like animals two days prior, the day Michael finally broke down.

The house was empty like a church on a weekday. Michael's mother, the once domestic fixture, had become a permanent resident, borderline employee, at the hospital herself, tending to her husband's every need. Michael was trying to clean up the kitchen, keep things in order, when his brother Gabriel stormed through the side entrance with pictures. Alone, and without consulting Michael, he went ahead and chose the design for the exterior sign of their father's idle new bar. Their father had already ordered it in good faith before the accident. The proprietor of the place where he had ordered it had left messages on their answering machine, angry, insensitive messages wanting final confirmation on the design, and of course, payment. With head turned away, Gabriel fanned the pictures of what the sign would look like on the kitchen sink.

"I picked blue and gray." He walked away.

"You didn't pick anything!"

Michael clenched the pictures and wanted to throw them at his brother. It incensed him that Gabriel had purposely assumed the task himself, like he was trying to prove that he was more willing to help their father than Michael was. Michael didn't appreciate what he felt was a lack of respect towards the eldest brother, like Gabriel wanted to usurp that role from him. Michael also didn't appreciate his brother doing things separately when they should have been pulling together as a team.

“You don’t give a shit anyways. You never did”, was Gabriel’s “already around the corner” dismissal.

A surge of anger and emotion then overtook Michael. He confronted Gabriel as he was about to ascend the stairway to his bedroom. Michael grabbed his brother’s heavy forearm, and turned him around, not wanting to let go of him until he made his point.

“You don’t do anything without me!”

“Fucking let go of me.”

“It’s not going to be blue and gray unless I say it is.”

“Michael, just fuck off.”

In an attempt to brush him away, Gabriel pushed Michael back with his other hand.

Michael pushed him back, and Gabriel, with his thick, paw-like hand, returned his brother a slap in the face. Michael’s cheek burned. And from that point, things got out of hand. They slammed into walls, used full fists for the first time, topped a few lamps, and put a hole in the wall to commemorate the violence. Michael finally had his brother pinned on the ceramic floor of the kitchen, his forearm pressing Gabriel’s upper chest down and causing him to cough. Michael kept repeating, over and over again, “you don’t do anything without me, you don’t do anything without me, you don’t do anything without me.”

Giving up the fight, Gabriel relaxed his wiggling resistance. His eyes squinted, like he was reading fine print. He saw something in his brother’s eyes, Michael assumed, a resonance in the way his brother repeated those words, that allowed him to recognize something Michael couldn’t, without the help of a mirror.

“It’s okay, Mike. You can let it go.”

Gabriel started to cry, and his face contorted to a time in that picture, in the little copper frame on the mantelpiece over the fireplace. Michael was three in the picture and Gabriel was two years old, and the both of them were crying over something unknown to them.

“You don’t do anything without me, you don’t do anything without me.” Michael continued to repeat over and over again, like a scratched record, as tears rolled down his face. His tears splashed onto his brother’s lips and cheeks. Michael couldn’t help the

release now. A seal had been torn, and a dam broken. Michael let his brother slide out from under him. Gabriel went to the bathroom first, and Michael heard the sound of the sink, the blur of water rushing. He curled in a corner of the kitchen, his back against the pantry drawer and the handle pointed in his back.

Michael pulled his knees in, and rocked back and forth. Simply crying with little sound. He cried. He cried like a little lost child, calling his father out timidly from afar with "Daddy, oh my God, Daddy..."

The interlocking of elevator doors opening, and the first sight of assembly cases with support groupings posted for families with brain related injuries, signified the step down floor where his father had a room. Michael and his brother walked down the hallway, past a number of bright blue bins and the nurse's desk, where they were supposed to check in. A few nurses offered them dirty looks when they didn't. Michael offered them his "don't touch me or I'll fucking kill you look." Neither side drew to a confrontation. Michael and his brother walked into their father's congested little room, filled with fruit baskets and flowers, and eased into their mission.

"How are you, Dad?"

Gabriel parted his father's disheveled hair with his hand. Michael stood back and observed how his father had changed. So fastidious in the way he used to keep up his appearance, his father now looked sticky with sweat, and unbathed with his shirt off. His father no longer sported the beard, which they had rather cruelly shaved off while he was sleeping in a coma. They didn't want it to discomfort him with the neck brace on. The absence of the beard made his father's nose look bigger, an insecurity of his, and stripped him of that dark, commanding look he so often exercised when he was angry. How Michael once feared him.

"How do you think I am? They cut off my legs, figlio mio."

Their father spoke now from another insecurity. He still felt like he had something stolen from him. The sight of such a restless, middle-aged man, who once acted half his age, now confined to a hospital bed, unable to escape, depressed Michael and his brother into chasms of silence. Michael tried to sound upbeat, as if things were still the same as they were.

“They’re still there, Dad. Don’t worry, they’re going to come back.” Michael knew that his father was a stubborn man and difficult to convince of anything, hence the reason why they were so nervous about their idea.

“I hope you right, Michael. Or else...what can I do for you boys like this?” His chestnut eyes gleamed with water. If his father would have cried, Michael didn’t know what he would have done. He had never seen his father cry before. He had never seen his father weakened before, this being his first time in a hospital, ever.

“You’ve done way too much for us already, Dad. It’s our turn to do something for you now.”

“Yeah, Dad. It’s time for us to do something for you.” repeated Gabriel, recognizing the segue his brother had left for him to bring up the subject of the bar.

It was initially Gabriel’s idea that he and his brother open the bar, although he never asked or wanted to involve Michael in the first place. Gabriel knew that Michael would have no interest in something that was completely unfamiliar to him. He was right to some extent. Michael had never entertained the possibility, or the interest in running a bar. But something else managed to lure his cooperation. It was a way he could do something for his father, in his father’s world, on his father’s terms.

Michael realized that his father never took much interest in their educational lives, and to spite him, Michael took even less interest in his father’s business ventures. But things were different now. Michael realized that his father needed him in a dependent kind of way, and Michael couldn’t let the opportunity to prove to his father that he could survive in his father’s world, the “real” world, as his father often called it, slip away. According to their father, Michael and his brothers lived in some fantasy world where there was nothing much to lose except a few percentage points on a report card. Michael wanted to redeem his many years of forced disinterest in his father’s life. He wanted to be his father’s son for once, and not the son, who, more often than not, chose to take different paths for the very reason of taking different paths.

So Michael’s motivation, as he summarized it long before, was tainted with other issues: some guilt, a sense of duty, loyalty to his family, a call to lead the family as the next man of the house, all of that character bullshit. Michael insisted on his involvement to Gabriel when he overheard his brother discussing his plans with a friend. Needing

Michael's powers of persuasion to convince their father, and probably feeling guilty for not including him before, Gabriel agreed to let him in.

Michael's father took both of his son's hands and squeezed. Michael absorbed the physical affection. He had forgotten the last time he had felt closer to his father. A sad look transformed his father's bloated face. Michael at once realized that his father was glad that his sons were there, and sad that they had to see him like this. Michael also realized that no matter how strong they acted, they needed him in their lives. Michael could read his father's recognition of their boyhood innocence in his eyes.

"Listen, Dad, we have an idea. But listen to everything we have to say first, and then tell us what you think."

Their father remained silent and partially distracted by the sounds of the heart monitor. While Gabriel prepared to introduce the subject, Michael pinched his father's foot to see if his father felt anything. His father didn't flinch. Tears welled in Michael's eyes now. He looked away, almost making it seem that he took more interest in all of the gadgets that hung above his father's bed board. The pungent scents of diapers mixed with excrement from the outside corridors intruded the air in the room. The competing smell of dinner newly arrived was no improvement to the atmosphere. Michael hated the hospital. It had become a second home to all of them, too fast, too familiar, and so unnecessary.

"Me and Michael have been thinking, Dad. You've put a lot of money into that old building by the Falls, renovating it into a bar, and no one wants to rent it out. And those who've called and asked about it want it for peanuts. We know how much money you've put into that building...and we want to take care of it...because it's your vision, and..."

Gabriel stumbled into emotion. Michael attempted to take over in a more assertive light.

"Listen Dad, you're getting much better now, but you have a lot of work ahead of you." Michael pointed to his father's dormant legs.

"You can do it, Dad. I know you can. You can walk again. I truly believe that. But you have to focus on yourself, now. Don't worry about us. We can take care of ourselves. We're old enough to take care of ourselves. God, when you were twenty-one

you already had a successful business and a family.” Michael inadvertently turned the tables on his father’s favorite form of intimidating him.

“We wanna help you now, Dad. We wanna open up the bar. We wanna build it up and hopefully find someone to rent it for what it’s worth, until they make the decision about the new Casino.”

The look on his father’s face was a mixture of disbelief and pride, with a pinch of dismissal.

“Ma, Michael. Are you crazy? I no put you in school to run a bar. You got too much education. No. I can no let you do that.”

“Why not, Dad? Listen, it will be a good experience for the both of us, and at the same time we can draw attention to the land, like you said. Nobody knows where it is right now, not even any of my friends. We have to do something now. It’s already too late and soon it will be summer. This year is supposed to be the best season for tourists because of the temporary Casino. Maybe we can make some money on the side too. I’m graduating in a month. It will be like a summer job. C`mon, Dad. You can’t protect us forever.”

Michael finally concluded his closing argument and received a smile from his brother for the effort.

Their father remained silent. This was a good sign, Michael thought. Perhaps he was considering it.

“Michael, what do you know about running a bar, or a *ristorante*?”

“What did you know about building one? You sell cars, and besides, we go to a bar every week, Dad. How hard can it be. You have the liquor license already. All we have to do is open the doors, find a cook, and maybe a bartender, and we’re set. Please, Dad. Let us do this for you. Let us be your sons. It will look good on our resumes.”

Michael took the ‘it will benefit us in the long run’ approach because he felt that his father would have objected otherwise. It was indeed a good opportunity for the both of them and more for Gabriel, who was a business major. It would have also given Michael the time to stall a decision about his future.

His father changed the subject of conversation altogether, joking for a smoke, which meant that he needed more time to think about it on his own. On the way home,

Gabriel had accepted failure, although Michael had the impression that his father would let them go through with it. After a few more days of the same sort of persuasion, their father gave them the permission to proceed with his half finished bar. They were to open on Michael's 22nd birthday, the ninth of May.

*In one-mono* was a phrase scratched into the floor joist under the dance floor. Michael and his brother found it by accident when they decided to shorten the stage length by a few feet. Before his accident, their father had built a two-foot high, eight-foot deep stage on the dance floor for live entertainment. Michael and his brother both agreed that the stage imposed itself on the dance floor, and wasted space that could have been used for dancing. When they cut the stage two feet in, Michael found the phrase etched in black chalk on an old wood foundation beam. Michael thought nothing of it until he found out from a potential buyer for the bar months later, who had researched its history, that their old building was once a vaudevillian theater house in the late twenties. After that revelation, Michael looked up the term, and discovered that the first part "in one", was meant to refer to the six-foot area immediately behind the edge or footlights, or center stage. "Mono", according to Michael's research, alluded to the Monologist. Regarded as the mainstay of vaudeville, the Monologist was a man or woman presenting acts entirely reliant upon talk, without use of songs, dances, props, straightmen (Michael imagined that to mean straight dressers), all "in one", or within that six foot range.

Michael and his brother spent a lot of time at the bar after they got the go-ahead, preparing it with what little they knew about the business, and with what others told them about it. It was indeed a blind challenge for them, having no help from their father, or mother, who spent most of her days at the hospital. They were alone on this project, with fantasies of success, and ignorance to the responsibilities.

They hired a cook and held off hiring a bartender. Michael thought they could save money from the start by learning to tend bar themselves. As was his usual, thorough way of doing things, he would go to the bookstore to purchase the 'Bartender's Bible to making Drinks'. Michael would carry this little book around with him always, like some sort of bar priest ready to offer absolution to anyone who tried to stump him with a drink.

Wanting to please their father and stay consistent with the vision. Michael and his brother decorated the bar as their father would have wanted it decorated. Their father had almost completed the bar himself. It only needed a few cosmetic additions, like some beveled mirrors in behind the bar, some pictures on the walls, glass racks, and a neon sign above the door to attract attention to the newest bar in town - The Clift.

Despite these attempts to modernize it, the inside of the bar resembled a restored castle or a little Villa transplanted from a tiny village in Italy. Once the heavy cedar door was pulled open, to the immediate right was a pool table and a jukebox, and to the immediate left were green tables and maroon textured chairs. The walls were sporadically painted with darker pastels of maroon and green, to resemble a Mediterranean café atmosphere. Vines with fake grapes hung from the ceiling to further this effect, as did stone looking ceramics, which were scattered unevenly on the floor. Towards the far corner on the right and against the wall of the kitchen protruded the beautiful oak bar. Very long and sinuous, it had an exquisite oak canopy hanging over top that matched the border on the walls. It was definitely the centerpiece with its brass step bars and cushioned stools. Almost across the bar and sunk in the opposite corner was the lounge area. There had already been a stone fireplace in that corner, and Michael's father had decided that a few black leather couches would make that area private, and romantically dark enough for couples. Deepest left was an enlarged but tiny little dance floor with a reduced stage and DJ booth. Across the dance floor and around a labyrinthine corridor were the hidden rest rooms.

Michael's father insisted that they light the bar with candles on each table in order to enhance the romantic aspect of the place, which would in turn, attract honeymooners - the anticipated clientele. It was a good idea. But how soon the grand expectations crumbled into a struggle for survival.

The first day of business was a success. All of Michael and Gabriel's friends visited, partied, spent a lot of money on booze, and then never returned again. The second day introduced the voids of reality, and its unwelcomed manifestations, starting with their first regular.

Michael arrived earlier that second day to find a mess from the night before. Melted wax foamed dry on all of the new tables, some having dripped like icicles onto



the chairs. Cigarette butts stained areas glittering with broken glass, while wads of green gum camouflaged themselves like chameleons in the carpet, waiting for an unsuspecting foot. Idle beer bottles stuck to the bar counter, and a leaky faucet returned the old damp odor of the place with an acrid vigor. More frustrating than the mess to Michael, was the hoard of salesmen that walked through the doors. At one time, Michael had to dismiss them in a line sequence. From lawn signs to liquor regulating machines to advertisements and even pepperoni sticks. Each had a promise to attract business, each had a lie to sell.

Michael and his brother had decided to open at 3 in the afternoon. They wanted to make sure they had enough time during the day to visit their convalescing father, who was still an hour's drive away. As well, Gabriel felt that they should push the bar more than the restaurant because, as he already claimed like the bar owner he thought he was, "there was more money and less waste in the booze."

Michael managed to finally clean the place, leaving twenty minutes to rest before he plugged in the neon "open" sign. Instead of sitting down and now very restless, he wandered outside the bar. He took a stroll around the building, and pulled out some weeds along the way. He ventured toward the back and listened to the roar of the Falls, while he watched from a distance a number of couples walking in hand along the sidewalk by the Falls. They were going to make a lot of money, Michael thought to himself. They were going to make their father proud.

While he proceeded to go in through the back door, he noticed an attic window very high up and disguised on the sharp slant of the roof. He had never been in the attic of the building before and never saw an entrance to one on the inside. He was curious to see how much room he had up there. When his father built the bar, for which he was also inexperienced, he made little storage room to keep supplies. An attic would be the perfect place for storage if it were easily accessible.

Michael went in and searched every area and room for a trap door to the attic. He finally found one camouflaged in the asbestos ceiling above the toilet in the men's room. Quickly, he jarred it open to an eyeful of dust and pulled himself into this dirty little attic, which had no more than a five foot ceiling, similarly clad in asbestos.

The empty area reeked of mothballs and dust, while he noticed an unusual instrument, a telescope, which pointed in the direction of the closed window he had noticed from the outside. Surrounding the telescope and bolted to the walls were rows of empty bookshelves. Expecting to see another view of The Falls from this telescope, Michael was surprised to find, after he had dusted off the eyepiece, that it pointed upwards, toward the sky. Who had left this telescope, he wondered, as he lowered it to view the cliff of the Falls. The mist produced by the crashing waters blurred the sight on this beautiful spring day. So Michael proceeded to spy upon the busy Chinese tourists scurrying about trying to find film for their cameras. Realizing that it must have been past three already, Michael raised his head and hit it on the ceiling. He squinted his eyes from the pain, and opened them up to see two names scratched on the tiny windowsill, just below the larger lens of the telescope. The names read, "Amaris and Zachary". Michael paid little attention to the names and rushed with his back bent forward to the trap door.

Quickly he dashed to the arched window to the left of the entrance, where the open sign hung. Afterwards he would wonder why he hurried. Three people walked through those doors that night. His brother and his cook, whom he would both dismiss, and Scorpio - their first regular.

The sight of Scorpio first walking up to the doorway after dark was both disturbing and pitiful. While he walked slowly to the bar's entrance, he leaned heavily to the side where he smoked a cigarette, looking like he would keel over. Sporting a long beige trench coat and a matching top hat that reminded Michael of pictures of his grandfather, whom he had never met, Scorpio entered through the front door, rather agonizingly. He wore very thick tinted glasses. The ash from this man's cigarette was long and about to fall so Michael's first reaction was to provide him with an ashtray. The man appreciated the gesture with a grin that exposed the deep yellow brown stains of the teeth he so often ground. Under his top hat, a slew of gray hairs swirled to the glistening sweat on his forehead.

"Would you like a drink, sir?"

The man leaned his weight against the bar instead of taking a seat. The hand that held the cigarette shook fast and furious. Michael noticed as well, that numerous skin colored Band-Aids graced almost every finger on this man's hands like rings.

"I'm on a mission."

He sucked the saliva that was bubbling on his lips, back into his mouth. He then lowered his head so that Michael could see his bright blue eyes over the bridge of his glasses. Underneath those eyes sunk heavy bags that seemed to lend further darkness to the tinted glasses.

"What mission is that, sir?"

"I am come hither to await the return of a lost love."

He lit another cigarette before the other expired in the ashtray.

"I went to visit my lawyers today." His tone of voice changed. "I have the proof I need."

"What proof is that?"

"It's confidential. But I got them right where I want them."

He let out an escalating laugh. It somewhat scared Michael, although the man appeared completely harmless to him, almost too fragile.

"Got who?"

"The doctors! I'll drill them another asshole."

Michael couldn't help to let out a laugh. The man joined in on the laughter.

"What is your name?"

"Scorpio."

"You're name can't be Scorpio?" Michael stepped back in disbelief. The man looked too old for such a dynamic name.

"Ssshh. It's my code name. Treat me like a spy on a mission." The ash of his cigarette grew long again, unnoticeable to him. It bothered Michael, so he moved the ashtray to hint for him to use it.

"What are you doing here, then?"

"I live across the street, in the Old Folks Home, next to the church." Scorpio pointed to it with his trembling hand.

"That's an Old Folks Home? I thought it was a place for priests?"

“It used to be. Only Father Jim there now. Do you have any apple cider?”

Michael nodded with an apologetic no.

Scorpio ground his teeth again, as he thought upon an alternative. The sliding sound made Michael shiver.

“I need a blowjob.”

Michael couldn't help but laugh.

“How about a coffee?”

Although it was a pain to make him coffee, and an even greater pain to have to serve coffee to his only customer when his fridges were full of beer, Michael relented. When he went to the coffee machine, he observed Scorpio turning around to walk out the door.

“Hey, wait a minute. Where are you going? Do you still want the coffee?”

“Yes, please. I'm just going for a walk.”

He sauntered outside and around the building a number of times. Michael watched him through the front windows and then went to the kitchen to watch him from the back.

“What is he doing,” Michael asked himself aloud.

Finally, Scorpio returned and Michael had the coffee waiting for him next to a candle on the bar. He drank it black with a half a pound of sugar. By accident, he deposited the ashes of his cigarette into the mug, and Michael replaced it for him.

“Has anyone come in here today?”

“No. I don't think anyone ever will.”

“I am meeting someone here.”

“Who?”

“My date.”

“Your lost love?”

“No! My date!”

“Who's your date?”

“The taxi driver who brought me here.”

“You took a taxi from across the street, why?”

“My back is killing me. They ruined me, those doctors ruined me.”.

“What did they do to you, anyway?”

Scorpio took the question as an insult. He appeared astonished and then shot Michael a look as if to suggest that the young man was the most ignorant creature on the earth.

“You can’t see that they ruined me? They attached me to wires, like a machine. And they made me take the wrong medication. They turned me into a zombie, a walking, living, fucking zombie.” Saliva over saturated his words.

“Why would they do that?”

“Because they’re sons of bitches!” Scorpio shouted irate, spit flying in every direction, including Michael’s. Calming himself with a smile, and that escalating laugh, Scorpio continued, subdued.

“They did what they wanted with me, without even asking me if they could.”

What could they have possibly done to this poor man, Michael wondered, this time to himself. In an attempt to change the subject, Michael brought up the subject of his expected date.

“Your date, what is her name?”

Scorpio looked down, closed his eyes for a period of time like he was about to fall asleep, and then, gathering enough saliva, he said very smoothly and in one breath,

“Her name is Linda. I hallucinated about her when the nurse bathed me last night and creamed.”

Michael couldn’t help to explode again with laughter, this time rather prematurely. The return of Scorpio’s scary laugh however assured Michael that he didn’t upset him. Michael guessed that this man must have been close to sixty years old, yet he talked at times like he was going through puberty. Scorpio coughed a raucous smokers cough and then went to sit down in the corner at a table fit for two. He waited there the whole night for his taxi driver to arrive, while Michael waited for a single customer to drop in for a visit. When it was time to close at 2a.m., Michael found him in and out of sleep, cigarette still burning down to his fingers, never having requested a real drink. Michael couldn’t find the courage to kick him out.

“Scorpio, I have to close up.”

Michael softly woke him, but Scorpio quickly blinked awake.

“Something bad must have happened to her.”

Michael nodded to humor him and then escorted him outside. Michael watched Scorpio, with a drifting thought about his father, walk across the street and disappear. The night wandered away in him and it frightened Michael to think of the New World he had officially entered - a world of the unexpected.

## **The Constellation of Scorpio**

It was the spring before the Summer of Love - 1967. Zachary was only twelve years old at the time, and Amaris only fourteen. But that didn't seem to matter much to him. He stood on that familiar rock at the edge of the Niagara River, about a hundred meters from the actual fall. It was six in the morning. It was the usual atmosphere - almost daybreak, blurry gray skies, raging rapids. Zachary wanted to jump in again.

Amaris was there to stop him, talk him out of it like only she knew how. Soon there would be others: helicopters, policemen, ambulances, some curious onlookers, and of course, the tourists. Most especially in this Centennial year, the one-hundredth year of Canada's birth, cameras were always poised and ready to snap the next piece of dramatic history, which only The Falls could properly set the stage for.

Perhaps it was only fair to get one last look at her, before he jumped in. He didn't really have to look at her. Her image enshrined itself into his memory. Her curly, reddish hair. Her green eyes. Her pale skin, sprinkled with freckles she considered ugly. Her developing teenaged body. What was the use in appreciating her beauty? She had never seen him as a stranger, and always as family. He hated that. Zachary wanted to marry Amaris one-day. He wanted to be her boyfriend, not just the friend who lived a few blocks away, not just the altar server who prayed with eyes open next to her at mass, and not just the kid whom she pitied enough to want to save from himself. She could understand everything else about him, but that.

Zachary attempted to stare himself into the water. As always it appeared foamy and almost green, polluted with plantation. A smell of spawning fish seemed to fog the immediate air around him with the mist from The Falls. He sweated profusely. He shivered from the moist misty breeze. He scanned the forest across the river, and on the American side, while perspiration drops raced down his black bangs and onto his nose to blur his vision. In the center of the rolling waves of water was Goat Island - a little, pubescent plot of land at the cliff of the Falls that refused to be taken down. In 1770 a British contractor for the portage on the east bank of the river moved a number of animals onto this same island to protect them from wolves and bears on the mainland. But only a goat survived the harsh, icy winter. And so the little island was dubbed Goat Island for its sole survivor.

Zachary's legs shook the most, more than the other dangling limbs on his skinny little frame. His heart swallowed itself with every thought of actually jumping in. He really wanted to do it this time. No one, not even her, could convince the voice inside, otherwise.

He had tried not to look back to where he knew she now stood - at the half wilted cedar tree before the rock. His best friend had found him out once again. Amaris would never let him escape his life alone. He wondered how she had found out this time. He had tried to hide this attempt from everyone, most especially her, because this time he was serious. But wasn't he serious the last time, or the time before that, he thought to himself. Of course he was. She had just convinced him otherwise.

In an attempt to distract his attention away from her, he remembered what he had learned from the books in her father's attic. As newly elected Mayor of the city of Niagara Falls, her father had collected a library of books in this Centennial year, detailing the impressive history of one of the greatest wonders of the world. So many stories, feats, and unfortunates. How on a similar day in August of 1844, Miss Martha Rigg, while reaching for a bunch of cedar berries on a low tree, on the bank below Table Rock, lost her footing and fell to her death, 115 feet below. He remembered other stories as well. However today, only one quote stuck to, and repeated itself in his mind, over and over again, like the tourist trolley hailing out the same warnings. A quote from Harriet Beecher, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, who once said of The Falls: "I felt if I could have gone over with the waters; it would be so beautiful a death; there would be no fear in it. I felt the rock tremble under me with a sort of joy".

Zachary felt the uneven slab of rock under his feet and imagined it to shake with this joy. It didn't. He feared and hoped it would betray his greater fears. Or perhaps it was the pressure of having her there that stalled the inevitable.

"Don't do it, Zachary. You know you don't want to."

Her voice was soft in behind him. He refused to look back.

"Don't try to stop me, Amaris, because you know I will, or you wouldn't be here."

"You're right, Zachary. You're the smart one. I know you want to. But I can't let you. Who is going to be my best friend?"



“You have lots of friends.”

“But only one best friend.”

“Why do you need me? You can have any boy as a friend if you want?”

“Why do I need my mind, or my lungs, or my heart? For the same reasons, because I can’t imagine my life without you.”

He could never fathom how she pulled it off, always sounding so honest with the corniest of words. It stupefied him. He could feel the warmth of her breath slowly approaching him. It soothed him, her proximity.

“You’re just saying that?”

“Oh Zachary, is that what you really think?”

Her voice cracked. He couldn’t help to turn around now. When he did, he noticed how fast her eyes swelled with oncoming tears. He wanted to see her cry, to see the drops fall. He knew she was sensitive and took things close to her heart, but she was also strong enough to hold everything back. He wanted to see a vulnerability in her, one marked with tears. It was always he who broke down. He always seemed to cry first. She would always be the one to console. But for once, he wanted it to be the other way around. Just seeing her eyes about to cry already afforded him some kind of strength, like he was capable of taking care of her for once.

“Don’t cry, Amaris. I didn’t mean it. I swear I didn’t.”

Some doubt departed from her face. The color of her freckles dispersed the paleness of her complexion. It relieved him.

“Why do you want to do this, Zachary? Why do you want to leave me?”

He felt sorry for her, and this pity for her further fueled the strength he had gained before. She really didn’t want him to jump. He knew that about as much as he knew that he wanted to jump. He felt how it hurt her not to fully understand.

“I don’t know what it is, Amaris. I just feel it. Some days I feel so happy and then some days, I feel so... I can’t explain it. And it’s only when I think of you, do I think twice.”

“Do you love me, Zachary?”

She edged even closer to the rock where he stood, extending him her hand. She was in her school uniform - her white blouse and vest, and the plaid kilt with black socks.

He loved the way she looked in her uniform, so much older. He loved the way she looked against the backdrop of trees, like a candescent spirit.

“Why are you asking me that?”

“Because it felt right to ask you, and I want to know.” She edged even closer. He was getting nervous again but this time it was a different nervous. His legs still shook.

“Do you love me?” She repeated those words.

“Do you love ME?”

Zachary knew how she would answer him. He knew that she loved him. She had said that she did a number of times before. He was insecure about which love she meant, though. Did she love him like a brother, like family, or did she love, love him, like in the movies? He could feel her taller presence approach him. He scanned her in one moment to see a few pimples disguised as freckles on her face, to see the lacy bra she was wearing underneath her silky white blouse. It was unimaginable for him to believe that such a girl could love him. Yet, she had never lied to him before. She never lied, period. She was perfect to him, the girl he had walked with every day to school, the girl who defended him to her friends, the girl who prayed in whispers next to him at church.

He grasped her hand. It was soft and a little balmy. His was always sweaty and cold. Too transfixed upon her now, he no longer heard the perpetual rushing of the Niagara River about to plummet the great and famous cataract, nor the voice inside that goaded him to jump.

“I love you, Zachary. And I know you love me. I just want you to love yourself, like you love me. Now come on, let’s get out of here, before anyone sees us.”

But it was too late. About to leave hand in hand, Zachary noticed two helicopters descending from above. They hovered like bees about to sting. One of the doors to the closest helicopter slid open and a man with sunglasses and a megaphone issued orders.

“Step away from the water.”

Zachary looked up and behind him to see the helicopters. He noticed a throng of people assembled across the river, like seals, to watch this unordinary event.

“Come on, let’s go!” Amaris screamed at him and clenched his hand. She dragged his rag doll body and he followed her through the blossoming bushes. They had left a comet trail of blossoms or so Zachary noticed as he looked back. They ran quickly

through the trail known only by the both of them. When they reached the top, they found themselves surrounded by greater throngs of people, teeming with curiosity. Amidst these tourists and their flashing cameras, stood two suited gentlemen with badges exposed at their belts.

“Come with me kids.” advised one of the taller gentlemen with the mustache and sideburns. Amaris refused to let go of Zachary’s hand. Her grip was strong. This made him feel better, the thought of their inseparability. It assured him that he could never feel alone in her presence.

The detectives escorted them to the ripped leather back seat of a brown Tornado. The doors closed and locked at the same time. The car pulled away, flashes silently sounded, and murmurs from the front seat could be heard like gossip in the wind.

When they were returned to Zachary’s house, he was excluded from the meeting in the kitchen. Present at the meeting were his two parents, Amaris and her father - the mayor of Niagara Falls, and Mr. Reynolds, Zachary’s English teacher. Soon to arrive was Father Benjamin, the new assistant pastor at St. Claire’s Church.

Zachary was dismissed to go upstairs to his room. He complied with the order but then crawled out to spy on the discussions. He seated himself outside of his room, with the door open just in case someone happened to leave the kitchen and see him. To better disguise himself, he leaned his tiny little frame against the thick banister at the top of the stairs. Through the jail-like pegs he peered into the kitchen to see them all seated at the table. He didn’t mind that they were talking about him. He was accustomed to it by now, having already attempted suicide twice before. He only wished that Amaris wasn’t there. It embarrassed him to see other people discuss his problems in front of someone whom he wanted to prove a strength in character to. Although obstructed partially by the yellow kitchen wall, he could see her sitting down, her hand in her father’s who sat next to her. Her father was a stern looking, dark man, a no-nonsense mayor who used to be chief of police, and a man who held fast to his family values and community responsibilities. He was furious.

“What is he trying to pull? This is the third time! It isn’t cheap to the city, you know, to send in helicopters, police officers, and ambulances to stop a kid from jumping

in The Falls. Our budget is already stretched with the festivities we have planned for the Centennial celebrations.”

“We’re sorry. Mayor Vega. We don’t know why...why...he.”

Zachary’s mother broke down into tears. She covered her small mouth with her skeletal fingers. Zachary noticed that her long neck was blotched. She was a simple woman in search of peace. She dressed in simple clothes, like the flowered summer gown she was wearing now. She had worn it so many times before. Zachary noticed. It was a staple in her daily appearance. He had always thought she could look beautiful if she dressed herself up and fixed her face with artificial color. It would hide those scattered nervous blushes. But she didn’t care, as long as her husband didn’t complain. He spoke up next.

“It’s hard for us to understand. Mayor Vega. We’ve tried and tried ourselves to understand why he wants to leave us. We’re a loving family. And he knows that we love him. For the life of me, I just can’t understand what pushes him so low. And I know he’s an only child, and he doesn’t have any brothers or sisters, but he *has* friends. Isn’t that right, Amaris?”

Zachary’s father enlisted the support of Zachary’s friend and it was enough to make Zachary feel sick to his stomach. His father was a good salesman for a vineyard farmer. He purported a concerned and disbelieving demeanor but his stubbly head and grooved chin told another story. He was a man whose impatience with mediocrity was intolerable. And lately, it was always Zachary’s mother who was the example of mediocrity. She could never do anything that pleased him. He would bark and ignore her politeness at dinner. And then he would use her when he had that gleam in his eye, or something that he needed. Zachary sat outside his room, in the same spot he sat now, the other night. He had spied on his father and mother arguing in the kitchen over the triviality of her plainness. His father had accused his mother of losing control of her femininity, and for looking like the farmer’s wife that she was. She had apparently lost control of the way she looked to him. She was failing to excite him. She wanted an explanation, but he couldn’t find the words to release his anger. She cried and begged relentlessly. To shut her up, he ripped her other old dress over her head, when he bent her over the kitchen table with the wobbly leg. Zachary remembered seeing his mother’s

underwear. But Zachary squeezed his eyes shut before he could see what happened next. He could hear her refuse him with blurred screams of pain and reminders that their son was in the house. Zachary's father must have pulled the dress tighter over her head and into a knot, because her screams were soon distorted.

"He has lots of friends. He's my best friend, Daddy." Amaris directed her concern towards her father instead. Zachary knew that Amaris was afraid of his father. He had told her everything because they shared everything.

"He's the sweetest, most considerate, loving boy. I know. And I can't understand it either, why he would want to leave me. We've had so many good times together."

Amaris paused when a knock on the front door punctured the discussion.

Zachary quickly reversed into his room while his mother hurried to the door. She opened it up to a statue of a man. Father Benjamin was a tall, dark, imposing figure dressed in the conventional black of course, but someone both Zachary and Amaris had taken an immediate liking to because he was different. As Amaris would express to Zachary a number of times, "he doesn't even act like a priest. He's so funny, and he never tells us what to do, or how to pray, or what we should read."

Zachary watched and heard Father Benjamin stomp through their tiny living room like an over sized domestic animal. With Father Benjamin now there, and seated awkwardly on one of the tiny chairs in the kitchen, Zachary felt he had someone on his side, an adult friend whom he could trust to stand up for him.

After the initial greetings and salutations, conversation resumed.

"You were saying, Amaris?"

Zachary's mother stretched her fake smile for the priest. She acted like she was embarrassed to have him in their household. She acted guilty of something and Zachary hated her for this. She was so obvious.

Amaris smiled at Father Benjamin as if to recognize an ally to support her in her defense of Zachary. Zachary knew what she was thinking. They thought alike. She then stalled, as if to reflect upon something deeper.

"It's just, this time it was different. Zachary really scared me today. I thought he was going to do it, and I don't understand why?" Amaris' voice lowered. She directed

her words to Father Ben now, instead of her father. The tone of her voice had changed. Zachary noticed. It was now firmer and like a mature lady's.

"I can't for the life of me understand it either." Zachary recognized this other man's clean voice to be his English teacher.

"He is an excellent student, very bright and creative. He has no problems with the work I assign him. He consumes literature like candy and he is very mature for his age."

"Perhaps too mature." In a loftier, authoritative voice, Father Benjamin finally spoke. The reactions in the kitchen of those people Zachary could see were looks of absolute attention and respect. It was a privilege to have a priest in the house and Zachary's mother quickly scurried about, keeping her attention on the priest, in order to serve him a cup of coffee.

"He and Amaris here are my best altar servers, but I worry about Zachary sometimes in church. He is so intent, so concentrated, like he carries another world upon his shoulders. He is much too pensive for a twelve year old."

"Forgive me father for what I have to say next." Zachary was embarrassed to hear his mother's maternal sounding voice interject.

"We are a God-fearing family, as you very well know. And our trust is first and foremost with God and the Church. But I am so afraid for my son. I've contacted a doctor at a hospital in Hamilton, and he wants to see Zachary in a month. He says that there are various procedures and therapies available to us, some more recent than others, that can help our son."

"But he is just a boy."

Father Ben disagreed with a tone of his youth in his voice and Zachary's mother quickly pulled back. Zachary recognized that tone when he would encounter Father Ben outside of church, or in the school playground during recess. Sometimes Father Benjamin would walk by and Amaris and Zachary would stop him. He would always have candy to deliver to them secretly, his favorite altar servers, and he would deviously hide these gifts from the other children so that they wouldn't think he favored one child over the next. Amaris and Zachary were often flattered by this special treatment. Zachary looked over to his father and noticed an intolerant stare there. It was sharp, like the stubble of his skin.

“A boy who needs help.” The mayor agreed with Zachary’s mother and saved her unintentionally from her husband’s intolerable wrath. It was obvious he was angry with his wife for interrupting the man of the cloth in his house, on his first visit.

“Wait a minute, wait a minute.” Amaris silenced everyone.

“You can’t send Zachary away.”

“Honey, it may be the best thing for him.” Her father turned her to face him and not the priest.

“No it isn’t!” She answered him strongly and everyone seemed surprised that she would talk that way in front of Father Ben. But Zachary noticed a smirk on Father Ben’s face which quickly dissipated. Perhaps he had fallen out of character for a moment to admire the girl’s courageous response.

“I know him and it’s only going to make things worse. Listen to me. He is happiest when he is around me. And I have to admit, that I am happiest when I am around him.”

Zachary smiled from the banister.

“Let me be with him. Let me talk to him. Let me spend more time with him.”

“But you already spend every day with him, dear. How much more time can you spend? I am worried about you too, honey. You have school, and your life too. You need to be enjoying these exciting times. You’re too young and too naive to have to be worried about someone whom you can’t help.”

“I can help him. I know I can. We have a connection, me and him, and I don’t really know why, but we’re like one in the same.” Through the corner of her eye, Amaris enlisted the support of the priest.

“I would have to agree with your daughter, Mayor Vega. I see the way the two of them relate to one another. They are almost kindred, like brother and sister.”

Although Zachary agreed with some of Father Ben’s words, the last part could have been omitted. For some time now he was trying to convince Amaris that he was of a nature different than her brother, and something more than her friend.

“Father Benjamin is right, Daddy. Zachary loves me, and I love him the same. And you’re supposed to help the people you love, right Father Ben.”

“Precisely, Amaris.”

“And you’re supposed to do anything that you can do to make sure that that other person knows that you love him. Zachary knows you love him. Mrs. Simms. and that you love him too. Mr. Simms. but he needs to see how other people love. outside of his family. in order for him to love himself. He never believes me when I tell him I love him because he thinks he’s not worthy of love outside of his family. But he is. and I want to help him see everything that we’re all trying to show him.”

“Oh Amaris. those are the most beautiful words I have ever heard. sweetheart. but we can’t let you do that. Your father is right. You’re too young to have to deal with these problems.”

Zachary felt that his mother was now competing for her son’s affections.

“Listen. Mrs. Simms. I love your son. And I know him better than any one here. We grew up together. since we were little kids. He trusts me. I want to help him. I’m his best friend. I am closest.”

A silence paused the characters in the kitchen area as the skinny little figure of Zachary made his appearance be known.

“She’s right.”

Zachary had made his way courageously into the kitchen. His father disapproved but he could nothing to him or his mother with people around. Zachary felt he was forced downstairs to support his best friend’s defense of their friendship. No one had anything more to say with him there. And so, they got up to leave. The tall, tanned figure of Father Ben was the first to walk by Zachary, patting him on the head. Zachary had always admired the perfection of the priest’s stature, his exhibiting faith and confidence, and his sharp, masculine features. Zachary knew that Amaris felt the same way towards him. Zachary often suspected that she had a secret, hidden crush on the newly ordained priest. Zachary’s petite English teacher hugged him as he walked by. The tall mayor crouched lower to offer him a piece of advice.

“Stay strong Zachary.”

“I’ll try. Mr. Mayor.”

“Good boy. Okay, Amaris. let’s go, your mother’s waiting.”

Zachary didn’t want her to leave but he also didn’t want to upset his father more. who leaned against the kitchen sink, alone, brooding. He was preparing himself for



something, thought Zachary, and Zachary wished at that moment that he were one of the strangers about to leave.

The visitors followed the mayor to the entrance and decided to change the subject of conversation in order to leave on a more positive note.

“So, Mayor Vega, will the Toronto Maple Leafs defeat the Montreal Canadians in the Stanley Cup Final.”

“Come on Charles, we both know that The Maple Leafs are much too old to handle the Canadians, although I do believe that anything is possible. And it’s going to be a good series, considering that this is the last Stanley Cup before the American expansion teams enter the league.”

“Hey, hey, hey there,” interjected Father Ben. “let’s not have any resentment towards my homeland.”

“Oh, we almost forgot, Father, that you’re one of them.” The mayor chortled in the sarcastic charisma that won him the election.

“Unfortunately, I *was* one of them until God sent me to this forsaken place of snow and ice.”

“Oh, come on, Father. It’s not all that bad.”

“You’re right, sometimes it’s worse.”

“After this year, I promise you Father, you’re going to think differently of this country. This year is going to be the turning point in the history of this country, mark my words, and not even that war of yours in Vietnam is going to ruin it.”

“Very well said, Mr. Mayor. I couldn’t agree with you more. Good day, all.” The agreeable priest opened the door to walk out of sight with long strides.

“I’m beginning to like him,” exclaimed Mayor Vega to Mr. Reynolds, as he followed suit with his daughter’s arm hooked around his.

Amaris turned her head to wink at Zachary. He would focus on that simple gesture in a minute or so. It would be the sole reason for his running back to her.

Zachary escaped his house through his parent’s window when he heard the screams escalate downstairs. His father boarded Zachary’s bedroom window on the outside but Zachary had found other ways to escape and then sneak back into the house.

The basement window downstairs was loose and just big enough to let his pliable body through. Once outside he ran at full speed to a low hanging full moon that had settled into the night, hosting a number of stars in discernible constellations. A cool summer breeze made the branches of trees hanging over the sidewalk ruffle with rhythm as Zachary raced by to provide his own wind. In between the swaying branches, Hanson espied various efforts by the city parks commission to decorate every lamppost with the Centennial symbol. They repetitively disappeared and reappeared in flashes.

Soon, Zachary would see in the moon's reflection the rather isolated area where Amaris lived. He had passed the religious pilgrimage of Loreto, which consisted of a church and seminary, a cemetery, and numerous statues of saints in a courtyard. Zachary and Amaris would often role-play in the courtyard after Mass on Sunday, pretending to be a different saint each time. Zachary's favorite was Saint Francis of Assisi and Amaris's was St. Claire of Assisi. Zachary almost tripped on the railroad tracks when he attempted to look back. It was time to slow down. He had arrived at Amaris' old stone house. It appeared to hang over the edge of the escarpment like a tiny castle.

Zachary loved Amaris' house. It was so isolated and private on the edge of the escarpment, and it had an extraordinary view of The Falls. The mayor's house was also close to the church they both attended, right across the tracks. Zachary inconspicuously snuck to the back and climbed the eavesdrop to the tiny attic window. He knew Amaris was up there probably looking at the stars through her telescope. He would scare her with the moon of his face. After she got over the scare, she would then let him in, he was assured of that. Her father's attic was their secret hiding place. It was somewhere they could both hide from the world in. A secret oasis.

After the initial excitement of seeing him at her window, and after Amaris had pulled his tiny little body in, her conduct changed. She appeared a little restless to Zachary, if not anxiously nervous about something. He wondered why. He had been alone with her in this same attic, which was relatively clean for an attic, countless times before. It more resembled a library. Amaris' father had built a number of bookshelves there for a quantity of books he couldn't yet fit. Zachary and Amaris stacked some of the books left abandoned on the floor, to make tiny little stools by the telescope. And when

it was Amaris' turn to look through the telescope. Zachary would grab one of the books from underneath him, to read in the moonlight that seeped in through the tiny attic windows. Zachary loved to read - about anything, most especially about the place where he lived. And Mayor Vega had an assortment of books on Niagara Falls, more than enough to satisfy the curiosity of a twelve-year-old boy. Amaris would often scold Zachary when his attention waned from her and to the legends he found in those books.

"Would you put that book down, and come and take a look at this!" She ordered him to the telescope.

"Hold on a second, Amaris. I found a cool story here about the Maid of the Mist."

"What about that stupid boat." Amaris fidgeted with the telescope before she sunk her eye in the eyepiece.

"No, it's not about the tourist boat that sails under The Falls. It's about the legend behind the name of the boat, it's an old Indian Legend. I didn't even know it had a story to it."

"Remember that time, in fifth grade, and you were still in second, when the whole school went on the Maid of the Mist for a field trip. Remember me and you, with those raincoats on, holding onto the railing. And then the captain led us near the rocks and the boat was rocking like it was going to keel over. Remember how afraid you were. I thought you were going to cry." Amaris smiled over to him from the telescope as if she was proud to have known that secret information.

"You were scared too!"

Amaris giggled. So did Zachary.

"Well, I guess you can say we were scared together, then."

"Yeah."

For a few seconds, Zachary's attention wavered from the books to watch Amaris immersed in the visions seen through the telescope. The arch of her back was long and so feminine to him, as was her neck, which stretched to the eyepiece.

"So, are you going to tell me?"

"Tell you what?"

"The story, this Legend of the Maid of the Mist. Read it to me."

Zachary took a nervous breath and prepared himself to read. He licked his finger and passed the first page, which had the title *The Legend of the Maid of the Mist*, no author, and a blue library stamp on it. Zachary wondered whether The Mayor, an avid collector of things, had stolen it. He said nothing to Amaris. She finally turned her attention away from the telescope so that she could face her friend, the storyteller.

“Lelawala was an Indian princess, daughter of one of the most respected chiefs by the Falls, Eagle Eye. When she was younger, she and her mother went berry picking. Lelawala loved berries, and wanted to eat some but her mother refused her. Her mother explained that they were picking berries for the feast of Thanksgiving to their god, Hinum. They would sacrifice the berries at this feast, and others in the tribe would do the same with whatever they deemed plentiful. In return, the god Hinum, who lived at the bottom of the Falls, would protect them from this ‘strange illness’ that would visit them on occasion, in the summer.

Lelawala’s family would perform this ritual every Spring. And as the years went by, she grew up to be the most beautiful girl of the tribe. She would soon meet Sahonwadi, who was son of Grondodakha, the canoe builder. Sahonwadi was a marvelous singer, and his favorite song was one he made up for Lelawala, because he loved and wanted to marry her. Their respected fathers approved wholeheartedly of the union.

They continued to offer feasts to the god Hinum every year and this year was no different. In fact, this year’s feast was the most generous. Everyone packed the ceremonial canoe with a lavish contribution, which they would send down the Falls, to where the god Hinum lived. Everyone was confident that Hinum would be pleased, and so they prepared for the rest of the year, while Lelawala and Sahonwadi prepared for a future together as man and wife. Sahonwadi’s bride canoe was nearly finished, and so was Lelawala’s bride dress, and everyone in the tribe was looking forward to that great day.

But that very night, after the great sacrifice, a great number of the tribe fell ill, mostly children. At first, no one was overly concerned, blaming the illness of their

children on the overeating at the feast. But then things got worse, so much worse that the witch doctors were called in.

Chief Eagle Eye was confused. "We gave a bigger canoe than ever before!" he tried to explain to the witch doctors.

"The God Hinum wants more. A greater sacrifice has to be made," prophesied the witch doctors in return.

"Do you know what Hinum wants?" Chief Eagle Eye was concerned. The witch doctors chanted their incantations in a disturbing voice. Everyone watched and worried in silence.

"He wants a girl!" The witch doctors finally revealed darkly. Everyone looked with shocked faces at Chief Eagle Eye.

"We never sacrificed a human being! Never!" He spoke out to the witch doctors.

"He wants the prettiest girl!" The witch doctors regrettably agreed. They did not say that the girl was Lelawala, but Chief Eagle Eye and everyone else knew that the prettiest girl was Lelawala. A sudden silence came over the people of the tribe. Wailings could be heard from mothers in the background, of sons they had just lost to the illness.

"It has to be," the witchdoctors advised grimly.

"Not Lelawala," mourned Chief Eagle Eye, hoping that the witch doctors would refute this vision.

The witch doctors nodded in unison. Grondodakha, who was the father of Sahonwadi, and knew how much his son loved and desired to marry Lelawala, was speechless and distressed.

Chief Eagle Eye was urged by the elders of the tribe to obey the witch doctors but Eagle Eye sought to visit the Ta Wa Sentha; the holy place where it was said the spirit Gitchi Manitou spoke to his people. Chief Eagle Eye lit a fire and prayed and asked Gitchi Manitou why the god Hinum did not take the previous sacrifice.

Gitchi answered.

"You people figure the gods owe you something for all that you gave in that canoe. But what use is giving without love? Your people gave for the sake of giving to the god Hinum. You must now set an example to teach your people to give out of love."

“Not Lelawala!” Eagle Eye pleaded.

The Thunderbird circled above and the spirit of Gitchi Manitou was no longer present.

Chief Eagle Eye walked back to the village with his head low and sad.

When he returned the witch doctors had already prepared with their masks for the night’s sacrifice of love. But Eagle Eye stood up and protested.

“No one is to tell her what is expected of her. Gitchi Manitou told me that we all have to give with a generous heart, and her life is hers to give. She has to give wholeheartedly. She is great of heart and knows her duty to her people. Gitchi Manitou does not think highly of gifts that are given out of fear, habit or other reasons. Tonight we will get together and we will fill another canoe with the best that we have, only then will I tell her and offer what is surely the best that I have.”

As Chief Eagle Eye announced this event, Grondodakha worried about his son, Sahonwadi, who would surely be distraught over what would be the loss of his future wife. When he found Sahonwadi, Sahonwadi approached him with the offer.

“Father, let me give my wedding canoe for the sacrifice that is to be. I can build another for Lelawala and me.”

Lelawala was around the corner and would not let her future husband sacrifice alone. She was proud of him and wanted to contribute to the cause.

“I could give my wedding dress,” she said to Grondodakha and Sahonwadi.

“You are beautiful, always!” Sahonwadi said to her lovingly.

Grondodakha lowered his head and walked away, too depressed to look at the young lovers, knowing that they would soon be separated by death.

The festivities began later that night and Sahonwadi sang a song for Lelawala. She was always standing beside him, and never wanted to leave his sight.

The bone whistles from the witch doctors then sounded, which meant that the moment had arrived for the sacrifice. They began to utter their incantations as a deep silence followed from the tribe’s people.

“Lelawala!” Chief Eagle Eye called for his daughter. He took her hand when she approached.

“Lelawala, our people are in severe distress. Someone has to give his life to the god Hinum, to plead him to save our people. Will you go?”

He saw the previous happiness fall from her eyes. She looked around confused to see Sahonwadi, whose eyes were furiously sad. The silence deepened as everyone watched. Lelawala looked around the crowd that was her people to see mothers embracing their sick children.

“I will go.”

Slowly, Chief Eagle Eye took the wedding dress from the canoe.

“Wear it, my daughter. You must look your best,” he said with tears in his eyes. She went to change and when she returned another silence befell the tribe’s people. In the adornment of the wedding dress, she was absolutely beautiful. She walked up to her father, who reached out for her as if she were a child. He lifted her up and set her in the canoe. As soon as the procession to the top of the Falls was about to begin, Sahonwadi ran into the woods.

“Let him find his peace,” one of the witch doctors advised Grondodakha.

Everyone followed the canoe to Table Rock. Chief Eagle Eye chanted his new prayer and the canoe was let down into the water. The current was raging strongly, and swiftly took the canoe, racing it to The Falls. Then, from out of nowhere and behind the bushes, another canoe came forth. A voice sang out.

“Lelawala, Lelawala!” It was Sahonwadi, for no other could sing the name with such love.

Everyone stared as the canoes came closer and closer but the current was too strong. Before the two lovers met they went over the Falls. No one spoke. The tribe’s people grieved as they stared upon the edge of the Falls. Slowly they returned to their village.

That night Chief Eagle Eye went to Ta Wa Senta to pray to Gitchi Manitou again, worried whether Sahonwadi’s sacrifice would upset the god Hinum even more. As the mist rose from the river below the Falls, he saw Lelawala’s beautiful face. She smiled at him.

“Father, I am come to tell you that the god Hinum is satisfied. He told me that there is a dragon living in the river bend, which has once again poisoned all our wells.

Tell your braves to go at once and kill this monster. He was the reason for the illness. Make our people clean out all wells and vessels, as well. If you do what I told you, our people will soon be well, and prosper to a ripe old age."

Suddenly she disappeared in her wave of mist and floated back to the Niagara Falls. Chief Eagle Eye tried to follow the image of his daughter but she disappeared. His heart was light though, for he knew that the sacrifice of the two lovers had not been in vain, and that his daughter was now happy.

At once he returned to the village to spread around the news, and before long, the dragon was slain and things were returned to normal.

Lelawala and Sahonwadi were never forgotten. And legend has it, that it was the spirit of their great love, which made Niagara Falls the paradise of young lovers."

"The end," announced Zachary.

Amaris applauded with a grand smile.

Just then, and almost coincidentally, they heard the distinct sound of music. It seemed to rise through the cracks in the boarded floor, from one of the levels below.

"Sssh!" Amaris placed her finger over her mouth while the music became louder.

Quickly but gently, they both dropped to the floor, ears pressed against the splintery wood. Mayor Vega was playing music for himself in his office downstairs. It was classical, and Zachary would recognize it years later, as Beethoven's, and the Emperor's Concerto, performed by Glen Gould, one of Canada's finest pianists.

With their ears pressed to the floor, Amaris mischievously smiled over to Zachary. He knew what she was thinking. She wanted to dance. But he couldn't dance. At his very best, he would murder her toes. He got up quickly to escape into another book before she could ask him.

Feigning interest in this book, which was upside down, although he couldn't flip it around or else she would have caught him, he noticed her returning to the telescope. The music played on, ignored.

When the coast was finally clear, and Zachary was assured that Amaris had taken more interest in the telescope again, he joined her. He pushed his pile of books closer to hers. And so they escaped even further, with the help of the music, into the animated



night. The stars led them to a glittering path, a fantastic imagination, while everything else seemed to drown into obscurity within the forested darkness below the window.

Staring into that little eyepiece, Amaris sought to narrate something herself, her explanation of the stars.

“Zachary, what do you think the stars are?”

“I don’t know.”

“I think the stars are homes, with the lights on.”

“Homes? Whose homes are they?”

“I think God gives the stars to angels on earth, to watch over their friends and family, before they go to Heaven.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean they live there.”

“Who lives there?”

“Whoever dies here, gets to live up there.”

She stopped abruptly, as if to think her ideas through more clearly.

“I thought you said angels live up there.” Zachary was confused.

“Who do you think angels are, Zachary?”

“Who?”

“Us. One of the nuns at church almost hit me once for saying this, but I believe there are beautiful angels inside every one of us.”

“Are you serious?” The theory eluded him.

“Yes, I am dead serious. It makes so much sense, Zachary. If I were an angel, in Heaven, I would want to come here, to earth. It would be like a trip, an experience away from home.”

“But why would you want to leave home if it was nicer.”

“Everything outside your home is always nicer, Zachary, because you’ve never been there before. It’s an adventure to leave home, but home is always in your heart, and that’s what makes you want to go back.” She now seemed to have it all figured out.

“So let me get this straight. Angels want to come down here, to earth, as us, because it is different from where they lived all their lives.”

“Right.” she cut him off. “but some don’t want to go back home because they like it here too much. But God misses them, because He loves them. But He also knows the power of the earth, because He made it. And He feels sorry for the angel who doesn’t want to leave, who wants to stay in the place where he or she has grown. I think God puts angels on earth so that they miss Him, so that they can grow to love Him on their own. But some angels end up loving God’s earth too much, or His other angels. So when they die and leave, he gives them a house in the sky - a star. The stars in the sky are to remind the other angels that they are not alone, and that other angels are waiting for them to go Heaven. No one walks into Heaven alone. Everybody walks in holding hands.”

“But why doesn’t God just bring them to Heaven right away?”

“Because the earth is too beautiful to be left all of a sudden.” Amaris switched seats with him so that he could see a particular constellation of stars in the sky that she deemed worthy of sharing.

“It’s the constellation of Scorpio, isn’t it beautiful.”

Zachary was silent in observation.

“Zachary?”

“What, what is it, Amaris?” It didn’t take long for the telescope to distract him.

“Do you think I’m ugly?”

He took his eyes away from the telescope and focused them on her instead.

“Why would you ask me that?” Zachary couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“Because I have this curly red hair, and these stupid freckles, and I’m whiter than a ghost. Nobody even looks at me at school.” She turned her face away from him.

“How could you say that?”

“I don’t know. Because I think it’s true.”

“But it’s not true. You’re a beautiful girl.”

“Oh Zachary.” She cupped his soft little face in her hands. “With you, I can do no wrong.”

He smiled. She smiled back. The music continued to elevate into their secret hiding space. It created more silence between them. They fixed their stares upon each other.

“Well, sir. What does a lady have to do to get a dance around here?”

“Please, Amaris. Anything but this. You know I don’t know how to dance.”

“I know that. But I’m going to teach you.”

She rose and offered him her hand again. He took it reluctantly. When he rose, she placed his other hand on her waist. He was nervous, and it showed, but she was so gentle and patient. Pulling him a little closer, she delicately began to move her feet, all the while advising him.

“Be light, tip--ee---toe.” She waltzed him around and around. She giggled in a whisper. He sweated in between the breeze of a dance turn.

“You have to look in my eyes, don’t worry if you step on my toes. I can take it. Just look in my eyes.”

He did as she asked. He seemed to soak in everything from that moment. Her hair rising with each turn. The telescope in the background appearing once and a while. Her smile attempting to provoke his. Her touch attempting to warm his nerves. He was alive that night, with the music and the moonlight, and the angel come from her star to teach him how to dance. He was so alive, it seemed to show in ways he couldn’t quite control yet.

When she pulled him closer, and he felt the pillow softness of her breasts against his chin, the twig between his legs grew to impolitely touch her. Was that why she was giggling, he wondered to himself.

“It’s okay, Zachary. Don’t be nervous. And if you want to touch me, you can. I won’t mind with you.”

She pulled him closer to her and lowered her head onto his bony little shoulders. He could smell the autumn nature of her hair. She leaned into him and he lost some balance. His hands, which were locked together at her waist, now separated. He struggled to clasp them together again and felt where her spine disappeared in the curvature. She continued to giggle, while the music seeped in through every crack available to it. She then slightly pulled back from him, so that her nose almost met his. This allowed him the opportunity to knot his hands around her waist.

“I’m going to kiss you now, Zachary. If that’s okay with you.”

He had never kissed a girl before. He had dreamed about it so many times, and she was always the girl. It seemed all too surreal to him. On a day when he was going to leave his life behind, he had managed to achieve his greatest dream. He could feel her breath on his face, as she moved closer and closer. His eyes were already closed, and he could no longer hear the music. She kissed him gently and lovingly, and his arms dropped from her waist to his side. In what seemed like one, simultaneous motion, she pulled her lips away, he opened his eyes, and she grabbed one of his hands and placed it on the breast covering her heart. Her stare fixed upon his. He wanted to look down, to see the pleasure he was experiencing from being able to touch her, but he couldn't escape the lock of her stare. She seemed to like his hand touching her. Her eyes told a story. He liked that she liked it, so he gave her his other hand, for her to do whatever she pleased with it. She placed it between her legs, and showed him how to rub there. He understood the lesson. He understood how much more she must have known about these things. She was two years older than he.

The mystery of what pleased her was literally within his grasp now. And she seemed to take pleasure in his discoveries, sighing whenever he pressed deeper. It similarly aroused him. She must have noticed.

She was just as curious herself. She placed her hand on the bulging spot in his pants.

It made him nervous. To his ignorant innocence, they were having sex. No one had explained the particulars to him yet, especially not his parents. All Zachary seemed to know about sex was the end result, that you could get a girl in trouble, or even worse, pregnant. But "how" you did that escaped his twelve-year-old mind. So when he ejaculated into his cotton pants before he had even considered undressing, and it managed to wet her kilt as well, he worried that he might have got her into trouble. Her nervous reaction confirmed this to him.

"Oh Zachary, oh Zachary, what were we doing? I'm going to go downstairs and change. And I'm going to get you a towel."

In emergency like fashion, she quickly left the attic to go downstairs, leaving Zachary alone to figure out what he was too afraid to ask about. The music finally stopped. He knew he didn't know how to dance.

Three months would pass as fast as that night did and without a moment which came close. It was the last day of school and Zachary was walking Amaris home once again. Although excited about school closing for the summer, Zachary would miss the excuse to be Amaris' walking companion. He walked her along the shade spotted sidewalk, and she appeared lost in thought to him. She was quiet, very quiet. It was unlike her to be so distant from him. She usually spoke her mind, even if it was blank.

"Amaris, is there something wrong with you? You haven't been the same lately, are you feeling all right?"

"Not lately, Zachary."

"You can tell me what's wrong, Amaris. You can tell me anything, and I promise. I won't tell anybody."

When she turned to face him, she was about to cry. This time, Zachary didn't feel any stronger to know that she needed his help. He simply felt sorry for her.

"What is it, Amaris?"

The tears then dropped, big one after big one, to her lips.

"Oh Zachary, my period is late. I think I'm pregnant."

Zachary's face must have turned pale because he felt his lungs stealing his breath inward.

"Uh, well, uh." He couldn't find a word to say anything. The English language was foreign to him for this important moment.

"I don't know what to do, Zachary. I don't know what to tell my parents. And I don't want to tell them how it happened either."

Zachary was still at a loss for words. He felt himself choking on his tongue.

"Zachary, what should I do?"

She grabbed his hand lovingly and stopped him in front of the cemetery next to the pilgrimage of saints. Zachary felt that they had nowhere to hide any more, not even behind the saintly figures.

"Tell them the truth. Tell them that it's mine, and that I plan to marry you." Zachary believed that the experience in the attic when he ejaculated in his pants was the reason they found themselves in this "trouble".

"Oh Zachary, you would do that for me?"

"I would do anything for you."

She embraced him so tightly, and he felt the wetness of her face on his thin shirt. A familiar face then intruded on their private conversation. It was Father Benjamin. He snuck up on the two children without a greeting. Amaris treated him rudely when he approached.

"Go away!" She yelled at him. "I hate you!"

The animosity and rudeness directed toward the priest astounded Zachary. It surprised him more that Amaris didn't receive a whipping by the priest for her words.

Zachary felt so bad for the amicable priest, who had such an unsuspecting look on his face. Without a word, Father Benjamin turned around and left them alone.

"Amaris, what was that for?"

"Oh, Zachary. You couldn't understand, and I wouldn't want you to worry about anything. You've been doing so good lately. I think you're right. I have to tell them the truth. This is my problem, not yours, and I can't let you get involved."

Zachary didn't understand what she meant. The problem was theirs to share. It took two people to conceive a child, even he knew that much.

But Amaris was adamant, as she walked ahead of him towards her house. He caught up to her and grabbed her hand to give her support. She grasped it tightly, like she needed to hold on to it. They then crossed the tracks. When they arrived at her door, Amaris faced her best friend.

"I'm going to tell him when he comes home from work, Zachary." Amaris meant her father, who usually came home about an hour after school ended.

"Do you want me to stay with you, Amaris?"

"I don't want you to get into any trouble, Zachary. You've done nothing wrong. I'm just so afraid, that's all. I've been so scared to tell him everything. He's going to be so disappointed with me."

Zachary pulled her in to embrace her, and she cried what was left of her tears. She turned around and walked into her home by herself, without a single word to Zachary. He waited there at the doorstep of that stone house for a good ten minutes without proper closure. He felt he couldn't move. He felt heavy, almost guilty, and yet older.

He finally turned to walk back home. The sky was temporarily overcast, and the air, a little damp in the breeze. He crossed the tracks and walked by the pilgrimage. Father Benjamin was no longer in the grounds.

Instead of going home, Zachary made a detour and walked into the little church. Upon entering, he smelled wax and wood, while murals of angels and saints in heaven on the wall, failed to attract his attention. He and Amaris had served Father Benjamin every Sunday, and he had seen too much of the church to be distracted by its aesthetics.

He made his way to the front pew and knelt down before the statue of Mary at the right side of the altar. Beneath her blue gown and a trickle of blood on her bare feet was a stepped on serpent. Zachary hoped to talk to anyone with an earshot of God. He hoped to talk to Father Benjamin so that he could apologize for Amaris' behavior. In between these distracting thoughts, Zachary prayed. He prayed to the Mother of all children for the child that was his best friend, now an expectant mother. He prayed long and hard for Amaris, although it didn't seem so to him. His eyes were closed. He could hear nothing. He could only think from his heart what he wished hadn't happened. He felt responsible, although he never asked for his own forgiveness. He didn't deserve to be forgiven. He had gotten his best friend in trouble, and he had left her alone to deal with the consequences of his actions.

He truly believed the baby to be his. He was going to go back to Amaris' house to support his best friend. He was going to stand by her like the man he was feeling himself to grow into, like the father of her child. And in the end, everything would be all right because he had done the right thing.

But when he left the church, he confronted another unexpected incident. It was easy for him relate to, but he could never fathom the right reasons for it. He was shocked and horrified by the body that hung from a tree there. He blinked his eyes, and the glow from the white sun setting behind the clouds blurred his vision, before he saw once again with red spots what he thought he saw the first time. A large, creaking figure hung by his neck from a tree in the cemetery, the rake nearby. It was Father Benjamin – his eyes wide open but not seeing his tiny altar server looking up to him.

Without hesitation, and frightened by the image, Zachary ran towards Amaris' house. He knocked wildly on her door when he arrived. When the door opened, he could

see Amaris in the kitchen crying in the arms of her mother. Mayor Vega then came into view from the other side of the door.

"Zachary? What is it son?"

Had she already told them, Zachary wondered, and was this the placid reaction from the rigid Mayor.

"Could you call back later, Zachary. Amaris is not feeling too well, and she is about to tell us why? We're having a family discussion."

Zachary couldn't hold it in any longer.

"It's Father Benjamin, he's ...he's...dead, look!"

Zachary pointed to the cemetery where the hanging figure swung from the tree like a swaying shadow.

Mayor Vega pushed Zachary out of the way to run to the cemetery. Halfway there, he called to his wife so that she could call an ambulance. Amaris rushed to the doorway where Zachary stood stunned. She had heard everything Zachary had said. When she came to the door to see for herself, she wailed loudly in tears, and then fainted.

Amaris' mother and Zachary helped her to the couch.

"You kids stay right here!" Amaris's mother was a tall blond woman with big blue eyes and almost always, a matching blue collared dress.

Zachary fixed his stare at Amaris. She looked so distraught, so pale and tired.

"I hadn't even told them yet."

Zachary ran his fingers through her tear soaked bangs, while she sniffled every so often. He grabbed a blanket and placed it over her. And then he went to the window to see the Ambulance light replacing the sun with its red glow.

An hour later, Amaris' parents walked somberly into the house. The sound of the heavy cedar door closing woke Amaris from her sad slumber. Zachary sat still in Mayor Vega's favorite armchair.

"Are you kids all right?" Amaris's mother's soft voice was recognizable to Zachary as her daughter's, when she was concerned with something. The voice was a hybrid of a whisper and a church lector. The intimidating presence of the mayor strolled into the living room. He was still wearing his three-piece brown suit from work.



"I want you kids to listen to me, especially you, Zachary. What Father Benjamin did to himself was wrong. Do you hear me, Zachary? What he did was wrong. No matter what problems you might encounter in life, they are not so big as to want to lose your life over them. There is a solution to every problem, no matter how large."

Amaris tried to hold in her tears, induced by the irony in her father's words, but she couldn't.

The Mayor then quickly went over to his daughter to embrace her. She cried into his shirted chest.

"Now what was it dear, that you were going to tell us?" His voice was now very mellow, like the music he enjoyed listening to.

"I can't tell you, now."

"Just let it out, Amaris. We're here for you. We'll understand, whatever it is. Like I said before, no problem is insurmountable." He ran his thick hands through her curled hair. Zachary watched with interest, his head lowered.

"I just...can't anymore...not now...I don't..."

"She's pregnant." Zachary finally blurted out for her. He thought she was holding it back because she didn't want to involve him in her "troubles". He thought she was trying to protect him, as she had always done in the past.

"And I am the father."

Amaris unburied her head from her father's chest. A shocked look displayed itself on her face, almost drying her tears instantly.

Although assuring and consoling only minutes before, Amaris' father had changed directions with his emotions.

"Is that the truth, Amaris!" He yelled, although he didn't realize he was doing so.

She looked over to Zachary. He nodded to her. She nodded back. Her father misread his daughter's nod to be an affirmation that the admission was true.

"I can't believe this!" Mayor Vega raised his voice.

"Easy, Charlie."

"Easy! Easy! How easy is it going to be for a fourteen-year-old girl, and a twelve-year-old boy, to bring a baby into this world. How easy is it going for the mayor to govern his city when it will be well known that I cannot keep any order in my own

family! Easy, you say." He threw up his arms and paced about the room. He then spread and clenched his hands, like he wanted something to crush or throw something.

"I'm sorry, Daddy."

"You have nothing to feel sorry about, baby. But you, you on the other hand. I should have let you jump the first time, you little..."

"Daddy!"

Zachary was afraid, and he felt that oncoming feeling again, that call from The Falls, which would have made things a whole lot easier for everyone, like her father had said.

"It's not his...." Amaris tried to explain but her father wouldn't hear anything of it.

"We are leaving."

"Charlie?"

"We are leaving. We are selling the house. I'm resigning as mayor, and we are leaving this city. We are not going to be the laughing stock of a city I was chosen to lead. Do you know what this will do to our family name, not to mention the gossip. It ruins everything. A child out of wedlock. Oh my God, no, we can't, we can't let it happen, not here, not ever here!"

He then stormed out of the house in a fit of rage while Amaris' mother went to comfort her daughter. While she did so, she offered Zachary a dirty look.

"I think you better go home now, Zachary!"

Zachary left without a good-bye. Within a week, the Vegas were gone, the Mayor had resigned. Zachary was on that familiar rock by The Falls before a policeman found him, and brought him home.

A few days later, his parents would consider sending him away again to a specialist.

## **The Dragon and The Indian Princess**

They are the strangest of odd couples. His name is Tootz. Her name, June. His skin is a deep black. Hers is whiter than a ghost. He is Jamaican. She is Italian-Native Indian. He is a dog. She is a cat. They live together. They missed each other the night before, the anniversary of when they first met.

Tootz awoke from the tail end of the trailer to the greasy smell of breakfast, and the common sounds of early afternoon in the Trailer Park - people arguing, the ruckus of mischievous children knocking on other trailers, and the swooshing sounds of transport trucks racing by on the highway above.

June had cooked him breakfast, or rather, tried to, although she knew it was nearly 2:30 in the afternoon. She waited for him impatiently, knowing that he would have to wake up soon. His first day of real work was ahead, the kind that he was depended on for. He was expected at four. It was her first day off in a month.

Tootz lethargically walked out of the bedroom and nearly ripped the tiny latch to the thin door that gave him an impossible attempt at privacy. He purposely showed her his lack of appreciation by not saying good morning. He scratched his balls, desiring to relieve himself with a piss.

Overjoyed to see him finally awake, a detectable hop appeared in June's step. She cut him off to reach the fridge before he did. She wanted to show him that she knew his mouth was dry. She wanted to complete the breakfast herself by pouring him the traditional glass of orange juice.

He simply ignored her like an obstacle. He walked around and nudged her ever so slightly and accidentally with his morning hard on.

She watched him compress himself into the bathroom. She didn't mind him leaving the door open. It showed her how comfortable he was with her.

After he had managed to wrestle his lanky body, with a birdcage for a chest, from out of the tight bathroom not designed for people his height, he made a detour. He went to the fridge to grab the milk, despite the fact that a glass of orange juice awaited him by his plate of eggs at the fold out table in the kitchen. He had always hated milk - with a passion. He hated it even more when she acted like his wife.

June pulled up a chair to sit across from where she had expertly put the plate of eggs. She crossed her legs. She placed her elbows on the table and leaned into her hands.

He attempted to force down some milk from the carton. He couldn't, no matter how hard he tried. So, Tootz finally made his way to the table. He crossed some debris on the way, and a few rolling papers stuck to his feet like tape. His long feet pressed against the tiled floor and made the framed pictures of smiling children on the table shake. Why had she moved them there, he considered.

"Aren't you going to try the eggs? I just made them." June was wholeheartedly willing to accept a maternal role if she couldn't achieve a spousal one. Her family was sickly, her mother long dead, and her siblings scattered like forgotten seeds.

Tootz didn't answer her. He was nervous enough as it was to have to deal with the same impasse over and over again. Although they had discussed it a number of times, and she had previously accepted the arrangement, she wouldn't get the hint. They were not married. They would never be married. He murdered commitments or any hint of them with the same serial killer appetite. Her innocence would only find victim in his disbelief of love. And her love would only tease his insatiable lust for other women, or spur other ways to hurt her.

June tried to start a pleasant conversation.

"So what is this place you're going to work at? Is it a bar or a restaurant?" Her tone was civil, like a trickling stream of water.

"Both. It's called The Clift." He took a sip of the orange juice. It pacified his aversion towards the way it made her happy to do anything for him. He distrusted the generosity of a woman. It was too perfect not to come with an ulterior motive, or the excuse that she had used birth control when she really hadn't. He looked over to a few framed pictures placed in shrine-like positions in a near corner. Two children, one black, one white – both his, not hers.

"What about your other job?"

June focused upon him as if with professional interest. She pressed her lips tight in order give him a neutral impression. No happiness. No sadness. No judgment.

"I still got it. It's part time. But if this other place wants me to work full time I'll drop it and work for them."

"But you haven't even worked a day there yet, and they already called you off. Why would you quit your other job already?"

She continued to focus upon every morning gesture of his, although trying unsuccessfully to disguise it. Even when he rubbed the crust from his eyes, she saw someone worthy of her future. She saw the man who let her sleep in the caged embrace of his long arms, despite his denial of love. She saw a man with a heart of gold. It was buried deep beneath his dark skin. And June wanted to mine for it.

"They're good kids. The owners are like twenty and twenty-one. And they need a cook. They need someone there who knows the bar business." Although he didn't want to impress her, he wanted to sound more important than a cook. He wanted her admiration with no strings.

She couldn't help to bubble with laughter.

"What? What are you laughing at?"

He couldn't help to join in on the laughter as well. It showed him that she could relax. He liked her better that way.

June misunderstood his laughter to mean surrender to her charm.

"What do you know about bars, besides chasing after women?"

She had hoped to take advantage of this trite vulnerability towards her, or at least garner an assuring response from him that could quell her insecurities about their relationship.

"You know me. Wherever there's pussy, I know about it." He had already deduced her angle. He deliberately attempted to push her back from the inevitable and monotonous fight with this remark. He hoped that he would have to go no farther.

She turned her gaze away purposely. She was upset and she tried to hide the fact that she cared whether he spoke to her like one of the guys.

"Where did you end up going last night?"

Impatient with his not warming up to her, she stood up nervously. She took away the eggs in one motion, not before turning her shoulder on him. She had bought herself some time for her swelling eyes to dry.

"Out with the guys."

"Where did you go, you didn't come home till around six in the morning." She scraped the eggs into the trash rather mechanically.

"To a party." He remained honest with her and found nothing wrong with it. He knew she was angry with him for not saying anything to hint that his feelings towards her might have changed. She wanted a lover and he had lost his belief in love. His hunger seemed to grow faster watching her dispose of the eggs. He would have liked to eat those eggs.

"Why didn't you call me to come. You knew I wasn't working last night, or today." She remained not facing him.

"Because I wanted to get sucked, bucked, and fucked. Is that what you wanted to hear?" He said what she had asked for, what she was dreading to hear.

She turned around to face him.

He noticed how gray streaks lined her jet-black hair, although she was barely 25. Her anorexic limbs trembled from a powerful surge of emotion she was not physically able to handle.

"Why do you talk like that when you know how much I love you." Although she realized she was encroaching upon a recurring argument, she couldn't hold it back any longer.

"I talk like that BECAUSE I know how much I don't love you. You think that's going to change in one day. We had this same conversation two days ago, and I'm not going to have it again."

"What is so wrong with me?" Her voice sharpened to that of a little girl who had disappointed her father by trying to run away while he lay sick in a hospital bed.

"Nothing is wrong with you. I just don't need a wife. I'm 29, I'm still in school, and I have two kids and a hoe that I'm paying alimony to. My mom's an hour a way, my family's in Jamaica, and I'm working two jobs." Upon realizing the pain he had caused her, he softened his voice to the person she loved in him.

"Listen June, I can't give you what you want from me. I just can't."

He got up and walked to the bedroom to change. The stubs of newly grown dreadlocks rubbed against the aluminum doorframe.

She went back to the table to take the orange juice away. Another failed attempt to secure the rights to a loved one.

Tootz boarded his bicycle and peddled awkwardly through the dry mud of the Trailer Park, which was heavily creased from a stormed rainfall weeks before. With little thought to the cars racing by on the bordering bend, he peddled out onto the winding service road. His speed increased with every passing car, and with the anticipation of slower, busier streets. On streets like Lundy's Lane, or Stanley, he would be the one passing cars, cars that were frustrated with little movement towards unseen tourist areas.

He peddled and pondered whether he had enough time to stop somewhere before work. Although he was new to the city, it didn't take long for Tootz to find the all too welcoming massage parlor, which catered to the sexual vices of incoming tourists wanting to get away from their wives for the evening. Such places disguised their motives by advertising their more profitable services with slogans written in neon marker on their windows, slogans like, "Get your palms read too", or "Free waxing with every massage".

The one Tootz was familiar with, the old Queen Street Parlor, had a number of rooms in the basement with drapes as dividers. The last time he visited, which was last night, he waited next to an unforgettable old man, a shaking disaster. The man was with top hat and thick, dark glasses. It took him nearly five minutes to light a cigarette with his shaking hands. They both sat aside one another, on old, wooden chairs. The stale scent that reminded Tootz of his grandmother's house mixed with the smell of this deodorant-less man waiting before him, contrasted well with the silhouettes of strangers in ecstasy. Such a scene did little to distract Tootz from engaging in pleasant conversation.

"You getting your knob waxed."

"My knob?" responded the man, almost fearful of Tootz's street dialect.

"Yes, you're knob. The Portuguese woman with the wart on her nose gives it best," recommended Tootz. He was all too familiar with the employees and their better talents.

“Oh,” the man smiled as if to finally understand. “I’m here to get a back massage, my back is killing me!” He spat when he talked, but luckily for Tootz the man sat beside him and not in front of him.

“Yeah, right. You little devil you.”

“I know. I’m a little devil.” The old man shrugged his shoulders. He nervously tapped his knees with a hand gloved with band-aids.

Tootz passed the lower curb and the familiar temptation to turn in. He decided he better not today. He chose instead to arrive early at work. He wanted to make a good, “first day at work”, impression. He made it to The Clift an hour before his shift – the last time he would arrive early.

He walked into the Clift with a rhythm not synchronized to the softer music playing on the jukebox. He carried his knapsack, the contents within what he deemed most valuable in his life, always with him.

The absence of patrons other than an old man standing at the bar with his new boss was little cause for panic to Tootz. He liked the charm of his new place of employment. He recognized its potential after seeing it for the first time a week ago, when he was hired. After that brief, informal interview, he had entertained the possibility of buying into the bar. His new bosses were green and could use his expertise, while he could use their inexperience to make himself seem invaluable to them. He approached the oak bar like an employee who had worked there for years.

“Hey Michael, you want me to work today or are you gonna send me home again with pay.”

“I’m not paying you for yesterday, Tootz.”

Tootz laughed and the sole patron at the bar laughed as well. The old man’s hands shook violently when he laughed, and the coincidence of seeing the old man from the parlor again scared Tootz, enough so that he flinched back. Tootz then rolled his eyes for Michael to follow him into the kitchen. To make it look less obvious, Michael followed him back a few minutes later.

Tootz took the apron from the stove handle and slipped his head through the strings. He criss-crossed the straps on the apron and adjusted a head bini over his



burgeoning dreadlocks. He surmised the clean kitchen area, the spotless working counter, the pristine stove and grill, and the clear oil in the fryers. It seemed as if they hadn't even used it yet. Michael walked in.

"Pretty clean, eh?"

"Did you cook ANYTHING yesterday, Michael?"

"All drink orders yesterday, Tootz. All drink orders."

"Who the hell is that lunatic?" Tootz was worried that the old man would ruin his cover and tell his new bosses about their chance meeting at the parlor.

"That's Scorpio."

"Scorpio? Like the astrological sign? Are you serious, Michael?"

"What's wrong with him?"

"I don't know about you, Michael, but that guy doesn't look healthy to me. Is he drunk?"

"Hasn't had a drink, yet."

"Then what is he doing here?"

Tootz opened the tightly sealed door of the walk in cooler. A cold cough of air from the corner fan inside tingled his island skin. He searched for a thermostat inside but could not find one. It felt too cold. He grabbed a few cucumbers and tomatoes and a ball of lettuce. He kicked the door open and Michael seemed to be observing everything he did in great detail. Perhaps he was trying to determine if Tootz knew what he was doing. Pretending to be an expert, Tootz laid the vegetables on the worktable and began to peel the cucumbers with a newly sharpened knife. The shaving sound assured Michael and he began to relax.

"What are you making?"

"Soup."

"Oh, good."

Tootz maneuvered lazily in the midst of a kitchen congested by stainless steel equipment. He had a feeling his new boss wouldn't mind so much. His new boss seemed to lack the confidence necessary to treat him like dirt, a talent his other, older boss, at his other place of employment, had mastered. The kitchen was a little small

according to the standards established by the other restaurant where he worked part time. although Tootz liked the idea of being in charge of it.

“So back to the lunatic, Michael. If he isn’t drinking, why is he here?”

“A friend of his used to live here. Before you came in he just finished telling me this story from his childhood, and how he was in love with this girl, Amaris, who used to live here. Did you know that right across the tracks, a priest hung himself?”

“Yeah, right. And my mama is a crack hoe.”

“No, I’m serious Tootz. He just told me the story.”

“So what, it’s an old building. I’m sure it’s seen a lot of psychos in its history. Listen to me Michael, because I’ve worked in a lot of bars before, and I’ve seen a lot of strange shit. Nobody wants to come into a bar with some pussy and see some old man shaking like this.” Tootz had already created an impersonation for this character Scorpio, and walked around the kitchen imitating the shaking behavior.

His new boss chortled at bit, but then seemed to remember that he had left Scorpio at the bar alone. Michael pushed the out door from the kitchen a little to see what Scorpio was doing.

“What am I supposed to do, kick him out. He’s my only loyal customer.”

“Listen Michael, you don’t need guys like that. This place is going to be rocking soon, you’ll see. I passed the word around at school.” Although Tootz was born in Jamaica, he had grown up in Canada, about an hour away. He had come down to Niagara Falls to find some work and to earn his Chef papers at the local college.

“There is going to be so much pussy in here, you’re going to have to find a way to open up these windows.” Tootz felt it getting hotter. He walked over to hit the switch for the overhead fan. Nothing motorized sounded.

The sound of the front door slamming shut lured Michael back into the bar area. Tootz followed his boss’s departure to the kitchen doors. Tootz peeked through at the new customer.

The older man who was previously at the bar, Scorpio, as Michael called him, had seemed to re-enter with Tootz’s other boss, Gabriel, Michael’s younger brother. Gabriel had his long arm cast over Scorpio’s hunched shoulders. He acted like he had managed to convince a new customer to come inside.

“Scorpio, this is my brother Michael, Michael this is Scorpio.” Gabriel introduced them with a straight face. At once, Tootz considered Gabriel to be the diplomat of his two bosses, and would later recommend the nickname to Michael. Gabriel appeared more friendly and less shy and introverted than Michael.

“Scorpio says he’s a spy.” Gabriel seemed to naively believe the old man, or so he pretended. He attempted to pull the man to the bar for a drink. For some reason, both Scorpio and Michael kept silent, until Michael finally blurted the truth out, like he was competing for the psycho.

“He’s already been here already. He’s been here all afternoon, and all of last night.”

Scorpio smiled a grand ugly smile. Tootz pushed through the doors a little to show his early presence to his other boss.

Gabriel’s face turned red, but he continued in his most congenial fashion, with his big arm around this strange creatures slouched back, to direct him to the bar.

“Let me buy you a drink brother.”

Gabriel offered and Tootz noticed how Michael already disapproved. But Tootz understood Gabriel’s approach, which was buying the first drink and having himself one, in order to induce another to drink.

“I don’t drink, thank you.”

Gabriel looked at Michael with a tinge of disappointment, and Tootz coughed so that Michael could see his look of “I told you so” on his experienced face.

“How about a coffee?” Michael then resorted to anything. Scorpio agreed. In an obvious attempt to please their only customer, Gabriel offered him a seat at the bar. Scorpio preferred to stand. He leaned on his elbow to steady his hand enough to light another cigarette.

The night dragged on, very slowly, and Tootz grew antsy to cook something for anyone. Scorpio refused to eat. And the remaining space in the bar couldn’t very well order an entrée.

Tootz managed to cook a few items from the rather plain Italian menu, some veal parmesan and some gnocchi, for his two bosses, conspicuously leaving more than enough

left over for him to eat as well. He was always hungry but it never showed on his physical exterior. The very scent of blood in raw meat about to be transformed into something tasty excited him. His friends often joked that he would kill himself by eating like a dog that didn't know when to stop.

His bosses were somewhat impressed with his half-ass culinary effort, but were more distracted by the emptiness of their business. They often argued throughout the night, and openly within Tootz's presence, as to what advertising they should pursue to attract some customers.

Tootz agreed that the problem was the place's location. Although the bar was propped up so close to the Falls itself, it was difficult to find amidst all of the winding roads that led to the area. Most of the tourists preferred to visit Clifton Hill, which was an area decorated very brightly with lights and entertainment scenes such as family arcades, dance clubs, and museums. The temporary Casino situated itself near the hill as well.

Scorpio left early that night. He said that he had some lawyers to meet the next day, regarding a very confidential case. Tootz, Michael, and Gabriel watched Scorpio disappear. A lady reappeared in his departing absence, from out of the foggy darkness, to take Scorpio's solitary place.

The lone lady that entered that night staggered up to the sidewalk like an alien trapped within an uncomfortable human body. She slammed into the large door. She then spent some time staring about outside, into the darkness, before she decided to enter. When she did finally enter, she swayed to the right and left, like she was about to collapse. She saw the myriad of empty seats available to her at the bar, but she showed no hint of surprise to the absence of a bartender in behind the bar. She sat down on one of the stools. She didn't even notice the three of them by the pool table.

Michael quickly left his stool by the pool table to walk around the bar. Tootz noticed, leaning over the side pocket to take a shot, that the eyes on this middle-aged redhead were gray and dilated. Michael silently mouthed to Tootz and Gabriel whether or not he should serve her a drink. She had obviously been drinking elsewhere.

But before Michael could decide anything, she extended him her pale-white, chubby hand across the bar. She introduced herself in an overly exaggerated, high-pitched voice.

"My name is Rebecca, want to see my tattoo?"

Tootz and Gabriel kept close attention, but pretended to be patrons in order not to make the lady feel uncomfortable.

"Sure."

Michael was hesitant to play along, but he did. She lifted her foot on the bar and showed him the tattoo on the outside of her shin. It was a dagger through the heart of what appeared to be a dragon eating a peace sign. Poorly done, it looked horrendously green upon her milk-like legs, or so thought Tootz from a peripheral angle.

"Nice." Michael smiled. Tootz and Gabriel looked on in quiet laughter.

"Want to see my other one." Rebecca's smiling expression froze upon her face.

"Sure, why not." Again, Michael played along, believing this to be last presentation, and she was about to ask him for a drink. She lifted her top and showed him the tattoo of another flying dragon above her left breast, which sagged without a bra, almost to her waist. Tootz and Gabriel rushed to the bar to engage themselves in the conversation. Tootz quickly sat beside her and introduced himself. Gabriel sat to the left of her on the other side.

Tootz tried relentlessly to convince her to show him that same tattoo upon her breast. She conceded a number of times freely. One time, she forgot to pull down her shirt and for an extended conversation, she left her breast revealed. Then, and for some unordinary reason, she began to graphically explain her sexual preferences, and why she preferred females to males.

"I like the touch of a woman's finger," she teased, and then caressed herself with her own finger in an external form of masturbation.

She went on to explain her past marital history, and why she had left her husband. She had experienced strange feelings towards the woman he was having an affair with. She had confessed her feelings to her husband, but he beat her for them. Coincidentally, the woman whom he was having an affair with had decided that she preferred his wife after all. Rebecca explained that their relationship had gone sour when she found her

new love, and two men, having three-way sex in her bathroom. They were wearing her mother's toilet doilies on their heads, and using her mother's fluffy towels as a blanket on the ceramic floor, or so Rebecca claimed. She shook her head in disgust.

Rebecca's gesticulations aroused Tootz. His attention was fixed on the way she maneuvered her hand on the swivel of her wrist.

Tootz also noticed how these same actions seemed to bother Michael, perhaps because she hadn't ordered a drink yet. She kept going on and on, on how a woman's finger penetrates more delicately a woman's vagina than a penis, while Tootz tested her sexual tolerance with phrases like, "But up your ass, you like a man."

Michael finally asked aloud, as if Tootz and his brother were customers instead of employees.

"Is anyone going to have a drink or are we going to talk about sex all night?"

For some reason, it seemed to Tootz, that Michael didn't like talking about sex in the company of his brother. There was a strange tension between them that forced even Gabriel into moments of silence and shyness. The embarrassment showed on Gabriel's blushing face when Rebecca spoke, although Michael's asking them to buy a drink broke this unordinary fraternal tension.

It worked, and Rebecca quickly took out her purse. She pressed a number of twenties on the bar.

"I would like a martini, please, make that a double. And how about you, mister Tootz, would you like a drink?" She spoke so delicately, like a little girl in a fairy tale.

Tootz extended Michael a smile to test whether his new boss approved.

"Indeed I will, Miss Rebecca, and a large, thick straw with that mister bartender."

Tootz never turned down a drink. His motto, taken from his bar days back in Jamaica, was "as long as money is going into the till, the bar stays open". He treated The Clift like it was his own, and although in the future he would wonder if this attitude bothered his bosses, he knew that it was easily passed over in their present, desperate situation.

Unaware of how to make the drink, Tootz watched Michael search for the recipe in a red book. Stripping it away from him, Tootz read aloud.

"Okay Michael, I'll read, you make. Let me see, martini, martini, martini..."

**MARTINI** (Traditional 2-to-1)

1.5oz. Gin

.75 oz. Dry Vermouth

**Directions:** Stir vermouth and gin over ice cubes in mixing glass. Strain into cocktail glass. Serve with a twist of lemon peel or olive, if desired. Purists claim that shaking a martini can “bruise” the gin, a dubious, though amusing, contention.

**History:** Gin was first created as a medicine by a Dutch chemist over 300 years ago. As people felt better they began to drink it more liberally. In the seventeenth century, the English took the Dutch potion back home and began to make it themselves. Once called “Mother’s Ruin”, and scorned by the upper classes, it reached sophistication with the use of it in the Martini. Gins are more than neutral spirits distilled from grain. They are reprocessed and redistilled with a flavorist’s collection of assorted herbs and spices, primarily juniper berries. Gin, like other clean spirits, is basically clean and bracing in flavor, but has fruity and herby overtones as well.

Tootz performed the entire drink description to the amusement of all in attendance.

“Take it off my pay, boss.” Tootz cradled the brimming martini glass.

Gabriel followed suit, as did Michael, who poured himself the small amount that remained in the shaker.

A toast was raised to the Clift, which was followed by the consumption of the Martini, and three looks of disgust, although Rebecca didn’t seem to mind the bitter taste.

“Damn, Michael. What did you put in this drink?”

“Just what you told me, Tootz. And a little semen...”

Everybody giggled, except for Rebecca. That stunned, blithe look seemed permanently etched on her porcelain face.

She kept ordering drinks until close, and even after close, despite the argument Michael and Gabriel had over this in the kitchen. Tootz understood Michael’s point. They had just opened and they were already breaking the most basic rules, but Tootz also understood from experience that sometimes you had to stretch the rules in this business, especially when you were sinking.

When his two bosses exited the kitchen after their argument, Rebecca had dropped some loonies into the jukebox. The woody sound of a country song reverberated

against the old stonewalls of the bar and Rebecca performed a most peculiar strip tease on the pool table. Tootz, in utter excitement, cheered her on.

“Eight ball, in the corner pocket,” he shouted above the music, over and over again. Rebecca attempted to dance sensually, and now with her top off, she accidentally rolled upon the pool balls left on the table. The sound of a few balls rolling, and eventually plopping in the corner pockets, amused Tootz.

He then approached his bosses with a proposition. He balanced the bouncing olive in the half-full martini glass in his hand, like he was enjoying the R&R of a cruise vacation.

“Listen guys, we can do her, but I’m not going to do her unless one of you guys doubles up.”

Michael and Gabriel stared at each other laughing aloud, but Rebecca couldn’t hear them. Her dance kept her occupied by the pool table. She rolled around on the delicate felt, and this made Michael a little nervous. Tootz noticed, although he couldn’t help to laugh as well.

Sensing that they hesitated at his offer, and that they wanted no part of this woman, Tootz changed his mind. He didn’t want his new bosses to think that he was some sick perverted freak. They had only known him for about a week.

“Forget it boys, who knows where she’s been. Eight ball in the corner pocket.” Tootz bobbed around the empty bar holding his martini glass up high.

“How are we going to survive this?” Tootz overheard Gabriel asking his brother as he picked up the woman’s discarded shirt and handed it to her, in an attempt to hint at her leave. She took it and strolled out into the night slipping it on, almost falling as she did so. Tootz and Gabriel laughed in their martinis but Michael had wandered towards the window to see where she was heading.

“I think she was the devil, Michael.”

“You’re full of shit, Tootz.”

Although Michael had dismissed Tootz’s statement, his eyes were wide, almost frightened.

“Well, it’s been a slice gentleman. I’ll be on my way.”



Tootz walked between his two bosses and behind the bar to deposit his glass in the sink. He went into the kitchen and noticed the dirty dishes in the sink there. He would clean them tomorrow. He shut the lights, grabbed his knapsack and bike, which he had rolled into the hallway outside the kitchen, and rolled it towards the front door.

“Don’t forget to lock up boys.”

“Is everything clean in the kitchen. Tootz?”

“Of course it is Michael. See ya tomorrow.”

Tootz peddled his bike into the fog and made a left down the gravel road. He had wondered where the woman had disappeared. It was foggy and he could barely see the stone church, only its zenith cross. He peddled and searched around for the pale Rebecca. He had finally found her. She had stumbled into the deep ditch between the gravel road and the bordering cemetery. She was helpless. She was asleep or dead, he couldn’t tell yet. Her white skin seemed to glow in the refracting fog. He stepped off his bike and dragged it down the ditch so that a passing car wouldn’t run it over. He then walked towards her, anxious and nervous for what he was thinking about doing.

“Rebecca, are you all right?”

She giggled.

“Rebecca, it’s me, Tootz. Are you all right?”

She giggled. She rolled around and Tootz noticed how the wet, muddy grass in the ditch stained her cotton pants. Tootz also surmised her fleshy arms. They were white and without tone or definition. The cellulite love handles above her hips showed between the shirt and pants. Her eyes were dilated. She giggled.

Tootz unzipped his knapsack and scrummaged inside, with his blind hand, for protection. He knew he had to have one left. He couldn’t find one. Tootz looked above his shoulder and felt alone in the silence of the fog. He looked out of the ditch and saw the slight curvature of a gravestone. He could not read the name.

Tootz approached Rebecca with no words while June arrived home from work at the off track betting place in her gray and green uniform. Tootz felt his feet sinking into the moist sludge of the ditch while June slipped her dress shoes off to rub her sore feet. Tootz felt the wet coldness of grass, which was wetter than it seemed, soak through his

pants as he knelt before an unsuspecting Rebecca. June undressed before the lopsided mirror on the back of the loose bedroom door her boyfriend refused to fix. Tootz unbuttoned Rebecca's wet pants and pulled them to her white socks. June stood before the mirror and noticed how her protruding hipbones made her body look like a cross. Tootz ducked his head under Rebecca's raised legs, now shackled by her wet pants. June sprinkled baby powder on her neck, in between her flat breasts. She rubbed lotion on her bony legs and arms. Tootz unzipped his pants and sunk his long feet in a soft area of wet grass and mud for leverage. June lifted the unclean sheets of their bed and sprinkled powder on the mattress. Tootz held his hand, which still smelled of strong parmesan cheese and sauce, over Rebecca's giggling mouth. June slept sound in a cloud of fresh scented powder. Tootz ejaculated into a woman and felt at peace for being able to disappear from love, if only for a night.

## **Jordan Donne**

Jordan walked into the gigantic catering kitchen of the Tourist Resort he managed. An army of bustling workers with fishnets on their heads and stained white uniforms failed to notice him, or they pretended not to. He knew the tricks. He knew they disliked him. He knew he could use them.

"Who's coming?"

They stared at this tall, blond figure, clad in his tuxedo vest and bow tie, not a drop of sweat trickling down his ghostlike face. Steam escaped in behind him and through the in and out door from where he came. He stood upright like a sergeant, expecting multiple answers to his questions, affirmative answers. Everybody stopped working. No one said a word.

An older, scruffy man, but not much older, with a fishnet on his head, but requiring one to maintain his big bushy moustache, was the first to walk up with an excuse.

"I don't know Jordan. I got no cash."

"Look who you're fucking talking to. You're talking to Jordan Donne here. Don't you ever talk to me like that again. You hear me. You're coming Eddy. Who's next? Jimmy, you in?"

A younger dishwasher, perhaps barely seventeen, probably newly hired, stood to attention, surprised that he was called upon.

"Well Jordan, I promised my girlfriend that..."

"Fuck her! She's probably sucking some other guy's dick right now. You think she gives a shit about you, working like a fucking slave so that you can buy her a box of fucking chocolates. You poor sap! You got a lot to learn kid. You lick and flick. You got that. You're getting fucked tonight, on me. You're in." Very quickly and as if thinking about the next guy who was about to escape the kitchen in behind him, he pointed to another.

"Lee? I'm not even going to ask you, Lee. You're in. Lee...and Charlie. I see you in behind me Charlie, that's good, that's good, you think you can get away, you're fucking driving now. Charlie."

"Five minutes." He then announced to the lot of them.

Jordan left the kitchen to a host of stunned faces who worked even more frantically than they had before. He raced, straight-legged, through the dimming dining hall and to the marble front desk of the Resort, where he kept his keys. He walked with a determined pace. People greeted him without him even noticing them fully. He acknowledged them with his esteemed nod, rather than a greeting. He was all business, although his required responsibilities dissipated about two hours ago. Once he retrieved his keys, he headed back in the direction of the kitchen through another luxuriously decorated hallway, where glass chandeliers were not quick enough, and too common enough, to distract his attention. On the way, he barged into an office plated with his name. He reached into the astutely organized desk and pulled out a little metal container. He slid it into the front pocket of his tuxedo pants, and it bulged uncomfortably there. He didn't give a shit if anyone noticed. His 21st consecutive, 14-hour day of work was completed. His first day off, from a time he could no longer remember, awaited him.

He breathed and polished the gold nameplate on his door before he left. In the reflection, he noticed the thin red rings, which outlined the white of his eyes, begging him for the mercy of sleep. No way. A thought that a few of them might have escaped encroached upon his insecurities. He quickened his pace to find the guys waiting for him outside the kitchen doors. The timed lights in the dining hall were almost dimmed out.

"Charlie, go and swing the car out to the front. Lee, make sure the doors are all locked."

"They're all locked, Jordan," smirked the young waiter, having anticipated the order and already checked.

"Fuck you they are, check them again!" Lee obeyed.

"The rest of you follow me."

And they did, like puppies. They followed always in behind him. They walked through the lavishly decorated corridors and hallways, their steps barely sounding against the padded carpet. Lee caught up to them eventually. Charlie was already ahead, waiting for them outside in the car. Jordan took the front seat and the others scrunched together in the back.

"Where to, Jordan?"

"I don't know, just drive. I heard this new place opened up down the street. Go there, it's called The Clift."

He walked into The Clift that first time with his arms extended like wings, amidst a host of followers, like he had already been to the bar a million times before. He stretched out about six feet four, with slicked back blond hair, the half-growth of a mustache barely noticeable upon his upper lip, and an extremely polished red nose. Approaching the bar, he pulled over his suspenders and loosened his bow tie. The owner whom he recognized, Gabriel, immediately walked over from the pool table to welcome him with a handshake. Jordan Donne began in an unmitigated flurry of short, unintelligible phrases.

"Nice place, nice place. Like it. Like it. Candles, nice touch. Could use some more decoration, some shit to draw the customers in from the outside, but who the fuck cares any ways, eh! Hey you, bartender," he called out to the well dressed young man behind the bar like one of those employed under him, "three beers, two rum and cokes, six shots of black sambuca, and a vodka, soda with a splash of cranberry for me."

Michael began to prepare the drinks and Jordan Donne tried once again to gain his attention, and rather rudely. He had heard the rumor that two brothers ran The Clift. He realized that this other brother, so similar to the one he recently shook hands with, was an owner as well, yet he decided to test his tolerance for good measure.

"What? Are you, fucking deaf? Buddy, do you hear me, can you see me? I'm trying to tell you something. I want you to grab a slice of lemon, I want you to squeeze it in my drink, and then stir it with a straw before you give it to me."

The bartender completely stopped and showed Jordan Donne a dirty, incredulous stare.

"What, does this guy speak English? Gabriel, Gabriel, who the fuck is this guy?" Quickly, Gabriel rushed behind the bar in emergency like fashion, once he recognized the look on his brother's face. Gabriel then introduced him to Jordan.

"Jordan, this is my brother Michael. We're partners."

"I don't give a fuck." Jordan continued to perform for the group of guys that giggled in behind him. "Get me my drinks, and squeeze the lemon baby," he demanded to a slew of high fives in behind him.

Gabriel pulled Michael aside, anticipating that his brother might surely throw these guys out.

"Michael, calm down. I know they're assholes, but this guy is going to spend a lot of money here. Suck it up, he manages the Gem down the street. I heard about this guy."

Gabriel tried to convince Michael in private, but Jordan Donne overheard. Although the two brothers had moved aside, they were still close, and the music wasn't as loud as they thought.

"If you expect me to kiss up and squeeze the lemon in his drink, you gotta be crazy!" Michael refused rather loudly to his brother Gabriel. Jordan wondered whether he spoke that loud in order for Jordan to hear him as well.

"Listen. I'm going to come back there and make it myself, if I don't get any service over here." Jordan continued to stir the pot. He motioned himself to come behind the bar.

"If you don't want to serve him, I'll serve him." Gabriel's actions seemed to say, as he began to make the drinks himself. Michael walked by the bunch of them, glowering at Jordan, before he headed into the back.

Jordan smirked.

"Where are the bathrooms in this fucking place, Gabriel?"

"Around the corner, Jordan, and down the dark hallway."

Jordan slipped his hand in his pant pocket and felt the cold, tin box there. When he rose to go the bathroom, the weight of it slid almost to his knee. Adjusting it a little, he walked awkwardly to the rest rooms, his shoulders back and his sharp chin in.

He followed the tacky, handwritten signs that directed him to the restrooms, but then he noticed an open door that must have led to the back of the place. Perhaps he should go and do it outside, he thought to himself, until he heard voices. He approached the door slowly, and peeked from an angle where he couldn't be seen. Michael was in

the back with a black man in an apron. The black man, presumably the cook, was sitting on a two-step ladder, while Michael paced about.

“You got a smoke?”

“You don’t smoke Michael, you a mama’s boy.” Michael snickered impatiently. He begged him for one again. The cook finally relented, more because he wanted one too, thought Jordan Donne, as he placed one in his mouth first. Michael vented.

“This guy comes in, like he owns the bar, and starts ordering me around. For one, he’s a cake, and he talks like he’s connected or something. What’s with these guys around here? It’s like a common delusion or symptom with these guys from The Falls. Like I know that Niagara Falls is a border city, and it has a history of organized crime and cross border smuggling, but this is ridiculous. Just the other day, I read on the front page of the newspaper that another mob boss was shot in the face in the middle of the afternoon. His daughter found him when she came home from school. Everybody that’s come into the bar has talked about it. I bet you this guy Jordan Donne is going to claim to know the boss that just got whacked. I’ll bet you a million dollars. I’ve seen guys like him around. They think they’re connected because they know a friend of a friend of the mob boss’s sister. And then they walk around with their buddies like they’re about to create their own little mob family, like they could be famous in the city too.”

“Michael, Michael, you gotta relax...”

“It’s hard to relax Tootz when the guy comes in and embarrasses you in front of your own customers.”

“There’s only Scorpio out there.”

“Whatever, it’s still embarrassing.”

“That’s the bar business, Michael. He’s putting money in that till, so you gotta be nice to him.” The cook removed his kitchen bini from his head. This man, Tootz, seemed to enjoy the break to the fullest. His eyes were transfixed upon the roaring falls now illumined with multicolored lights. If Jordan was his boss, he wouldn’t be so relaxed.

Michael seemed to struggle with his smoke, often choking and spitting. It might have been his first.

Tootz breathed out a silent stream of smoke. The stubs of his early dreadlocks made a funny shadow with the seeping moonlight against the back wall.

“Listen. Michael. I like you guys. From the first time I met you guys. I was dying to work for you. You’re good kids. But you’re in the bar business now, whether you like it or not, and when you’re in the bar business you’re going to come across a lot of assholes that think they’re all that, when really they’re just a bunch of lonely losers looking for friends. Take it from me Michael, you can’t let these guys get to you or else you’re going to drive yourself crazy. You gotta play the game, put on that face, and act like everything they say is the furthest thing from the bullshit it really is, or else Michael, we ain’t going to be in business much longer.”

Michael seemed to agree. He flicked his cigarette and forgot to butt it out with his foot.

“Oh, Michael. I would have smoked that. Don’t waste the butt, man.”

“You’re right, Tootz.”

“Of course, I’m right, Michael. I’m black, remember.”

They both laughed. Jordan sensed the end of anything else that might be of importance to him in the conversation, so he continued to walk through the little tunnel to the bathroom. He was happy to see a lock on the door when he entered. He loved the sound of it clicking into the doorframe because it assured him absolute privacy. He then pulled out the metal container from his pocket, and placed it on the yellowed sink. It was once his grandfather’s tobacco box. Jordan wiped the lint from the design of an Indian and a canoe on top of the box, and remembered a time when he used to watch his grandfather roll cigarettes. His grandfather had left him the box, full of freshly rolled cigarettes when he had died. But those cigarettes had disappeared as quickly as memories of him had. Jordan thought, to be replaced with Jordan’s own deplorable habit.

He delicately opened the box, like there was something fragile in there. He let his bony, long fingers slide across the tubes of money inside, tightly rolled and stacked like cylinders. He removed a few of the rolls revealing a blanket of white, which lined the bottom of the box. The glare off the shiny plastic, which encased the cocaine, made the drug appear all the more appealing to Jordan Donne. Underneath the blanket of snow was a single razor blade and a sharp-edged mirror. Beneath these instruments was a



picture of a blond haired girl, around the age of 6, smiling, missing teeth. She was standing in a barrel, which read Niagara Falls. The background in the picture was a deep blue.

Jordan Donne proceeded with the ritual. This was his private snorting before he would invite everyone else to join the party. He needed this private hit in order to keep the sardonic juices flowing, and the insecure weaknesses at bay. And he needed the hit, should a girl stroll into the bar he wanted to fuck. He needed it to have the balls to approach her in front of his friends, to tell her to fuck off if she was insulted by his one night, one-time offer, to keep his stamina should she accept his offer. He was insatiable for many things. But the girls would have to wait. He was busy. He was anxious. He was a tad sorry but more proud of himself for making Michael feel so insulted. He still had it, an effect on people better than him.

He quickly cut the cocaine on top of a sink he meticulously dried with the box of paper towels beforehand. And with *his* roll, a roll of hundred dollar bills, he snorted the white lines on the highway to his place of freedom. No guilt, no remorse, no shame, and no pain. Grandpa was definitely looking down on him.

He instinctively ran the sink, not to clean up, only to run it for the noise. The splashes of water bespeckled his face like beads of sweat. Within minutes, the tin box was fastened tightly, and he was ready for another drink. In another minute he would start feeling the buzz, but for now he sniffled like he had a cold.

He made it to the bar and ordered another round of drinks, plus one. And he waited. He waited for Michael's return to the bar area. He was probably hiding in the kitchen, or behind the doors to the kitchen.

When Michael finally returned to the bar area, Jordan Donne introduced him to his favorite drink. It rested conspicuously idle on the bar, a vodka and soda, with a splash of cranberry, perspiring on the sides like Jordan himself.

"That's yours Michael, and get over here so we can do a shot. I'm gonna open this fucking place officially," Jordan announced to his friends, who weren't listening. Michael grabbed the drink, and joined Jordan rather reluctantly. He had a look on his face like he was wondering where this abrupt change in attitude towards him came from.

Jordan extended his hand out to Michael and apologized for his rude behavior before. Michael reached out to shake it and Jordan pulled him in to sit next to him at the bar. Jordan kept him there for the next hour and a half.

"This is me," Jordan began, again with his arms wide open and in a wise-guy fashion, just as Michael had previously perceived. But Jordan Donne was willing to adopt the role.

"You're not going to see anyone like me again in your life. I'm fucking telling you. Eddy, tell this guy who I am, tell him if you partied with anyone anywhere close to me." Jordan called out to Eddy, like he was behind him, when he was actually playing pool. Eddy heard him still, and responded supportively in a rough textured voice because he was much older, yet for some reason, more condescending.

"You're the man, Jordan. You're the money."

"Yeah, I'm the money." Jordan liked that remark.

"This is going to be my place now." Jordan assumed a responsibility in Michael's direction. "I used to go to a place, The Mist, and Charlie, you know Charlie who runs the joint, used to own the Ridge, loaded to the max, drives a sterling silver Mercedes. Him and me are like this. Waitress there, couldn't stand me although she wanted to fuck me. He pulled her aside once, gave her shit in front of the whole bar. 'This guy pays your wage,' he said to her. I paid her wage, I paid her wage, I tell ya. She couldn't look me in the eye ever again, that stupid bitch. I got the money, you can see that. You know I'm big time, you're not stupid, you can figure that out for yourself, eh Michael. You know your bills are paid every time I walk through those doors. We're in the same business, baby. I run the Gem, all business there, but after work, I take it to the max man. I take it all the way, ask anybody, who Jordan Donne is, man. We give her, the whole night baby, and we don't stop".

Jordan wondered whether he repeated certain things in order to keep himself rolling. Michael sat quietly next to him, every so often sipping the drink Jordan bought him. He seemed to like it.

When Jordan left to go the restroom again, this time with his buddies, he wondered whether Michael would figure out what he was doing, and grow angry enough to throw him out.

But when Jordan returned to the bar a number of other people were in the bar to distract Michael from Jordan's private little party in the restroom.

Two women had taken spots around the bend of the bar. One was a tanned brunette, possibly East Indian, and the other, pale faced and much older. Shortly afterwards a little guy bounced into the bar by accident with his short and chubby girlfriend. He was talking to Michael, having taken Jordan's seat, before Jordan rudely ordered him to get off. He seemed to have lost himself while trying to find a private place with a view of the Falls where he could presumably, "drill this broad" - a saying of his he liked to use repeatedly.

He was a small, tiny boned, 25-year-old Serbian, with oversized cowboy boots, and his shirt opened three buttons down, exposing a gold chain not worth exposing. On the chain was an unusual charm and what looked like a tiny barrel. If anything, Jordan thought, the "mob" influence was in full effect with this guy. His hair was short, light brown, and parted up and to the side. He had the tiniest of hands, and a thin goatee mustache. The sight of him, and especially how he walked, invoked instant laughter from both Jordan and Michael, only because he seemed to walk as if he housed a large barbarian between the legs of his extremely tight fitting, acid washed jeans. He was a sight all right.

Jordan and Michael watched this little gremlin bounce around the almost empty bar, like it was the biggest party ever assembled. He accosted every other female in the bar with a picture, which he also showed to Michael and Gabriel, and even Jordan. It was a picture of himself in a garage in front of a yellow garbage can with red paint. On the garbage can the paint read, "Royce Vukosovic, the First Serbian Daredevil", and then Jordan understood. He understood that the garbage can was not supposed to be a garbage can but a barrel. Royce explained his dream to everyone, most especially to the other girls in the bar. As expected, it only aggravated his trailing girlfriend.

"I'm going to be the first Serbian to go over The Falls in a barrel. I'm going to be famous, brother. You're going to see my picture everywhere!"

His barrel-like girlfriend frowned down on him as he drank heavily without her. He spent her money on the girls he was accosting, all the while within her company. He had placed a loony in the jukebox, and proceeded to perform a strip show for this girl at

the end of the bar. They showed absolutely no interest in him. He was a piece of work. Jordan thought.

Royce performed for the humor of the six patrons. two of them female. One of the patrons, an older man approached Jordan suddenly. He thought Jordan was Michael. Jordan presumed, because then he changed direction and stood directly in front of Michael. He angrily denounced Royce.

“Kick that little miscreant out of here. He is ruining the atmosphere, and giving me a headache.” This older man advised Michael like he owned a share in the business, before he retreated once again to his little table in the corner to fall asleep. Jordan watched him.

“What in God’s name is that?”

“That’s Scorpio.”

“Scorpio?” Jordan provided the necessary emphasis Michael seemed to leave out.

“I know, I know, he’s going to ruin my business, but I don’t give a shit. He’s an old friend.” Michael watched the little monkey Royce entertain the rest of the patrons with his antics. Gabriel was in tears laughing. Scorpio was the only one in the bar not amused. He tried to light a cigarette but couldn’t because his hands shook too much.

Jordan looked at Scorpio and shivered, while he noticed Royce frolicking from girl to girl, now with his shirt completely undone.

“Got the winners here, eh Michael.”

Jordan sipped his drink with an all-knowing smirk. Jordan then sighted Tootz at the bar, who was also having a drink. Did Michael and Gabriel allow their cook to drink during working hours? Jordan wondered. Were they crazy?

Perhaps staring too long at him, Tootz got up and approached Jordan and Michael.

“Looks like we got a ‘bar jester’ eh, Michael?”

Jordan smirked.

“My name is Tootz, I’m the nigger.”

“Thought so,” Jordan replied, “and I’m the racist.”

All of them laughed, while Jordan excused himself to go to the bathroom again. He had searched long and hard for a place that depended upon him to survive. He had

searched far and wide for a place he could own in principle if not on paper. He had searched day and night for a place outside his office where he could lock himself securely in the bathroom. Other, less important things were worth tolerating.

## **Mr. and Mrs. Angeli**

Mrs. Angeli was once a unique beauty, or so she thought. She stared into the mirror and wondered whether she would ever sleep the same again. The indelible bags under her eyes resembled purple "my husband abuses me but I'm trying to hide it" bruises when she added color. Her hair was thinner, unkempt, and blanketing a sea of gray. Adolescent pimples seemed to resurface, while the strain veins in her eyes encroached upon her dark pupils. She missed the peace of deep sleep in her life.

Her husband's accident and his subsequent paralysis had forced her to get no more than four hours of sleep at a time. Although he was home from the hospital, he refused to do things he was capable of doing because he still considered himself sick. So, when the time came for him to catharize his own urine every four hours, he expected his wife to do it. That was his wife's job, to care for her sick husband who could help himself, and her, by helping himself, yet, he was the unfortunate, not her. She accepted the responsibility in the way she was brought up to believe that every suffering was another cross for a purpose unknown to her.

But now was the time to get ready. She was going to see her sons in their new place of employment, at the restaurant their father had built against her will. She worried if they were all right without her.

Mr. Victorio Angeli was not overly excited about seeing his sons, although he welcomed the opportunity to get out of a house he was not accustomed to relaxing in. Before his accident, and almost always after work, he would eat, shower, style his hair with a bristled brush and a can of hairspray, with a towel over his silk shirt, so that he wouldn't ruin it. He would douse himself with designer cologne, adorn himself in the gold he had managed to smuggle back from a trip to Italy, and then figure out ways to hold in his growing belly in front of the mirror.

Like his friends, he would leave his wife to watch TV, alone, while he went out trying to redeem what regrets he had harbored since marrying at a young age. He knew that his wife minded. He also knew that he could get away with it because she was easily pushed over, and he was not doing enough tangible harm that she could point to and accuse him of. His chariot of the week awaited him outside. If it was a special night, like

a stag or cruise night, the maroon Cadillac from the garage would have to make a cameo appearance.

But things had definitely changed since the accident. He was now confined to a life with two wheels instead of four, and a wife who loved him unconditionally. What an unlucky man, he often considered himself, not seeing the greater value of better things in his life. He had found a new infatuation – the desire to walk.

Mrs. Angeli often used the dim lit bathroom in the basement, to get ready, then and now. It was a quiet place for her to escape, away from the kids, away from the frustration of having to wait for her husband to get ready. She hated making a mess of the good bathroom upstairs, the one strangers were only permitted to use, with her rollers, or her honey waxing routines. As well, she wanted to wash down those long strands of hair that were often left in the sink, those that frightened her with gray roots.

She instinctively wondered whether her husband was fine upstairs, by himself. She knew he was ready to leave, and the thought of him ready before her frightened her. He often took hours to get ready in the bathroom. He was probably in the same spot where she had left him, staring out of the window and into their neglected backyard, his hands crossed delicately in his unfeeling lap, and his gaze distant to another world of thought. She hurried with her makeup. Without his sons around to keep him company, her husband was alone, and she definitely knew how that felt.

She rushed upstairs only to find her husband's younger brother, Tony, and his dolled up second wife, keeping her husband company. A double date. Although she was happy that someone stronger was there to help her husband into the car, and his wheelchair into the trunk, Mrs. Angeli was apprehensive when it came to her husband's side of the family.

She had felt a strange tension develop between herself and her husband's two brothers, two sisters, and mother. When her husband was in a coma, his family had excluded her, like twenty-five years of marriage had not allotted her the credibility to take care of him any more. They often surrounded his hospital bed like a pack of vicious hounds, ready to bite at any outside force that wasn't blood related. At times, she felt their ignorance had blamed her for her husband's accident. When the neurosurgeon had

taken her aside to explain to her that her husband was now a paraplegic and she should make some changes at home in order to accommodate him. His family had refuted her ideas with a common snarl. They accused her of not believing that her husband would walk again. They were convinced that his paralysis was merely something that would go away like the flu. They spoke often behind her back, and judged her to have her own agenda when she was merely listening to a doctor's advice. She inwardly despised their spiteful looks toward her, like the one her brother in law was offering her right now. But she felt she needed to treat her husband's disability with peace, rather than hurt. So she swallowed her pain for another rainy day.

Tony helped her husband transfer from the wheelchair to the car. It was so heavy, that damn wheelchair. And it was so depressing for Mrs. Angeli to have to watch her once independent husband, struggle to do something so ordinary to so many people. It was even more disheartening to see him have to depend upon a family member that often abandoned him for better, more self-serving pursuits. His brother's new wife, and what she represented to Mrs. Angeli, which was the reason Tony abandoned her husband at the most crucial time in the business they were building, was a testament to her husband's family's hypocritical ways. But Mrs. Angeli was not about to hold grudges. That would make her one of them.

As his younger brother drove his beloved Cadillac, the only car that made the transfer from his wheelchair easiest, Mr. Angeli remained silent. He didn't like his brother driving his most prized possession. He liked it less that he had no choice in the matter. He had nothing to say, and less to be excited about. He seemed only to tolerate the drive.

"So are they busy?" His younger brother glanced over, trying to start a pleasant conversation. Mr. Angeli envied the youth of his brother, his rosy cheeks, his neatly trimmed mustache, and his strong laborer's hands. It bothered Mr. Angeli how his brother gripped the soft leather steering wheel, like he was twisting a wet cloth.

"I don't know." His wife had answered for him, from the backseat. She was always the talkative one.

"I called yesterday and I heard music and people laughing."



“Then they must be busy.” Tony tried to insert a reason to feel positive in a quiet car, and Mr. Angeli sensed it. He sensed that his brother was trying too hard to make things seem normal.

Mr. Angeli reached down to pull a pack of cigarettes from his socks. The jogging pants that attempted to look like dress pants, which he was forced to wear because of his diaper, had no pockets, and he had forgotten to wear the polo shirt with the pocket.

He knew that no one would complain this time when he smoked in the car. It was his car. He was the one who was sick, not them. He could do anything he wanted because they pitied him, but no more than he pitied himself. His brother of course said nothing, and drove the Cadillac rather smoothly around potholes and construction obstacles.

“Ma, are you going to hit every pothole? You’re going to ruin this car.” Mr. Angeli exploded.

“What potholes. I no hit no potholes.” His brother was frazzled by the remark.

Mr. Angeli remained silent and was not prepared to engage in an argument over nothing.

They drove through the better part of town. The bright lights of newly erected hotels with group rates posted, and no vacancy neon signs glowing, were a far cry from the darkness that overcame them once they turned onto the winding stone road that led to The Clift. A tiny neon open sign hung in the old building’s front window. There were no cars parked outside, and Mr. Angeli already noticed the failure in maintaining the landscaping. The grass was a little long, the vines that slithered up the old stonewalls could have been trimmed, and they could have added more lights on the facade to make the building more approachable as a place of business that welcomed people, and not the dead.

When his brother managed to finally roll him in, the place was too empty for a Saturday night. Now nearly eight o’clock, no one sat at the bar. No music was playing, and three tables of people seemed to be waiting impatiently in silence. A murmur of conversation could be heard from the kitchen area.

“Where are they?” wondered Mrs. Angeli aloud, as she walked alone to the kitchen area. Mrs. Angeli softly glided to the kitchen doors to hear her sons arguing.

“Okay, Michael. I have a table of four, a table of three, including a child, and a table of two. And Mom and Dad should be here any minute. What are we going to do? Where the fuck is that Tootz?” Gabriel exploded. Mrs. Angeli knew that her middle son possessed the most violent of tempers and she often worried about him. He was not very good at controlling his temper. He took after his father’s side of the family.

“He was supposed to be here by five, the latest five thirty.”

Mrs. Angeli slithered in through the kitchen doors. Her bustling sons didn’t even notice her at the doors to the kitchen. Michael was wearing an apron, steam was rising from pots on the stove, and the deep fryers were competitively starting and restarting.

“Oh, he’s going to get it that guy, let me tell you.” Gabriel continued to fume. “Does he think this is his own place? He thinks he can come in whenever he wants, and do whatever he pleases? He’s gonna get it from me tonight... You know what the problem is, you’re too nice to him, that’s what the REAL problem is.” Gabriel had channeled his anger towards his brother. Mrs. Angeli hated to see them fight. She hated to hear strong words.

“Me? How is this all my fault?”

“He’s our cook, not our friend. We treat him like a buddy of ours, and he takes advantage of it. He’s lazy, that Tootz, let me tell you. These guys from the islands, they’re all laid back like that, and if you give him an inch, sure he’s going to take it.”

Gabriel paced around the kitchen while Mrs. Angeli watched from around the corner.

“What are we going to do?” Gabriel then demanded of Michael. He ran his fingers through his hair, a nervous habit of his he had developed in kindergarten.

“Go and take their drink orders, and stall a little. And then take their food orders. If worse comes to worse, and he’s not here by that time, I’ll cook myself. I already have everything prepped,” a calmer Michael explained. Gabriel turned to stare into his mother’s face.

“Mom, what are you doing here already?” A stunned look flattened his face. A busy Michael looked over his shoulder with a bland reaction, while Gabriel hugged his mother.

“We’re pretty busy, Mom, so I don’t have time to talk. Talk to Michael. I have to go and get some drink orders.” Gabriel escaped approaching the subject that they might have needed help quickly.

“Hi sonny.” Mrs. Angeli addressed her eldest son with a light chuckle.

“I never thought I would see the day when my son would cook something for me, and you’re wearing an apron. Mummy doesn’t even use an apron.”

Michael tried to smile, but he found it so hard to in the midst of his preparation and worry. He seemed at once glad to see her, and nervous that she was there to see him like this. She pitied her bright, intelligent son, whom she considered out of place in a kitchen.

“Do you want mummy to help you.” Mrs. Angeli watched her son jump from stove to fryer to oven, and he hadn’t even received an order yet.

“No, no, no, Mom.” Michael’s bothered demeanor seemed to dismiss her.

Just then the click of the printer in the kitchen sounded above all of the other bubbling noises. Mrs. Angeli read the order, “Two pizzas, 40 wings, 5 salads, an order of chicken fingers, a veal sandwich, a hamburger, fries, with gravy” - and they hadn’t even ordered yet, she thought silently to herself.

Michael reacted.

“I told him to stall, what the fuck is he thinking?”

Mrs. Angeli had never seen her more angelic son swear before. It frightened her into a panic.

“Michael, do you need any help?”

“No Mom, it’s all right. My cook should be here any minute. I can handle it.”

“Anything ready yet?” Gabriel strolled in trying to act so professional in the presence of his mother. She knew how ignorant he was to how long it took to prepare food.

“Ready! Do you have time to prepare their salads?” Michael tried to sound as well like he had been confronted with this situation before. He tried to ask his brother without trying to sound desperate for his mother’s help.

“I can’t get my hands dirty in here, and then serve them drinks out there. You see, I told you we should have hired a bartender.” Gabriel competed.

“How can we hire a bartender, if we don’t have any money?” Michael screamed to him over the trembling tops of pots, beginning an argument that didn’t need to be started then and there. Mrs. Angeli could hear the sound of a pot about to overflow. Her son quickly attended to it and she was proud. He sidestepped the possibility that water might still escape, by throwing a few burgers on the grill.

Gabriel all the while watched him, not even bothering to do something, so Michael blew up then and there.

“Will you just get the hell out of here, if you’re not going to help!”

Gabriel quickly obeyed and left.

Within seconds another order for two pizzas and four salads dotted on the printer line. That must have been their order, wondered Mrs. Angeli, knowing that her husband was hungry and craving pizza tonight.

“I’ll make our pizzas...”

“Would you just get out of my kitchen, Mom! I can handle it. Just leave!”

She stared at him for a second and left the kitchen silently, while Gabriel revolved in to see if anything was ready, again.

Although the food took a little time to get out, Mr. Angeli enjoyed it. His sons had hired a good cook, or so he thought and bragged to his brother. His demeanor had changed since he had put something from an outside reality into his stomach. His wife’s light cooking, which paid too much attention to the absence of salt, had become too bland for his taste buds. He liked the heart burning gassy feeling rising upwards through the stomach he could only feel the top half of, and to a bellowing belch, which no one seemed to chide him for, especially his wife. He noticed that his brother ate a lot as well. Mr. Angeli failed to notice that his wife ate very little. He didn’t ask her if anything was wrong, or if she wasn’t feeling very well. Even if she was feeling under the weather, that

was a far better state than being stuck in a wheelchair. No one deserved his mercy, except himself.

She rose and excused herself from the table to go to the restroom. When she did so, Mr. Angeli noticed his son Michael peeking through the doors of the kitchen. Michael then motioned to follow his mother to the restrooms before he stopped still. Mr. Angeli had previously assumed that Michael hadn't arrived to work yet, and that he was outside stocking up on groceries at the Price Check down the street, or on an advertising run. It was rude of his son not to welcome them officially, in his own bar. It was rude of his son not to greet his paraplegic father. But just as he thought upon this, Michael made a U-turn to approach his father. Mr. Angeli was pleased at his decision. Michael asked him how the food was while he seemed to scan the rest of the customers for reactions as well. Everyone else in the restaurant seemed pleased.

But before Mr. Angeli could offer a comment, Gabriel, who was scurrying about from table to table, serving drinks, offered his two cents.

"When you make the pizza, try to make it a little thinner..."

"Yeah, Michael. The food, it was beautiful but you gotta tell the cook that the pizza, it's gotta be nice and thin."

"Okay, Dad. I'll tell him that." Michael suspiciously agreed with his father. Stunned at this phenomenon, which was Michael agreeing with him, Mr. Angeli was taken aback. Michael seemed distracted by something. He left to go towards the back entrance.

Mrs. Angeli was in the tiny bathroom again, this time sobbing quietly to herself. A knocking at the door interrupted her.

"Mom, are you all right?"

Before she could answer him, he pushed the door in a little, like he did at home. She scrummaged in her purse to find a Kleenex to dry her tears, and to hide them from her son.

"What's wrong, Mom?" She blew her nose.

"Nothing, honey. Nothing's wrong, Michael. Why would anything be wrong?" She offered him an assuring smile, but it did even less to convince him.

He had a look on his face like it was his fault, like the time when he was only five and he picked her dandelions thinking they were flowers. She pretended that she liked them but she couldn't help telling him they were weeds. He exploded in a tantrum because she didn't like them. He later broke his piggy bank to go to the nearby corner store. He had returned with a carnation, from that point on her favorite, and an apology. He had the same look on his face, as if he knew that she didn't deserve to be yelled at, no matter how stressful the situation. He apologized for his previous indiscretion.

"I'm sorry mom. I didn't mean to yell at you."

"What is going to happen to us?" She couldn't help to release these words in tears. She placed her soaked face upon his shoulder. She cried like a little girl.

"I don't believe in anything anymore, no God, no Jesus, no Saints, not anyone. Can't they see that I can't take it anymore? Is it possible for someone to suffer their whole life?" She was alluding to all of the sicknesses she had to endure since she was a little girl. She was always the sickliest of all her siblings, and because of that, the most faithful out of all of them. She had been sick so many times that even her children, and most especially her husband, had taken those sicknesses for granted. Her pain and suffering had now culminated to a point where it now infiltrated her strong, fanatically religious spirit.

Michael looked at her with disbelief in his eyes. She had tried to teach him to become like one of the Saints she so depended upon for hope, by example, yet she felt she couldn't uphold that example any longer. And so, she continued to cry deliriously in her son's embrace.

"It's going to be all right, Mom. It's just a bad year that's all. But I promise you, it's going to be all right, because I'm going to make it all right."

"I know honey, I know. I'm sorry." She finally realized what she had said and felt guilty about it.

"I can't believe what I just said."

"That wasn't you who said those words, Mom. That was a tired, broken down woman. Don't worry about that. God will forgive you. He knows you believe in Him. He knows that you love Him down deep." Her son tried to convince her, but he seemed more like he was trying to convince himself.

“I’m just so tired, honey, that’s all.”

“Do you want me to take you home, Mom. I’ll come home and watch over Dad, and you can get some rest.”

“No, no, no.” She refused his charity, like a good saint accustomed to giving it herself. “Your uncle and your father are waiting for me. Get out of here and let me clean my face before I go out, and don’t tell them that I was crying,” she ordered him strongly.

She saw a look of admiration in her son’s eyes, of her resiliency, when she walked out of that washroom, to her husband’s insensitive. “Where did you go, Toronto?”

She once again assumed the role, acting as if nothing had happened. But just then, she heard her other son’s angry voice reverberating against the walls in the tiny building. Their cook must have finally arrived. Almost instinctively, Mrs. Angeli sought to provide damage control for her sons.

“How about we play some music from the jukebox?” She exclaimed with a fake smile before she took her seat at the table.

“Elvis, play some Elvis,” her husband ordered, but she would select Frankie Avalon before Elvis, if the CD was an option. As she walked over to the jukebox, and after having selected a tune so that her husband couldn’t hear his son’s voice, she listened more closely from her closer position near the kitchen. Within seconds, she heard Michael’s voice trying to silence them both.

“What the hell is going on, here?” Michael yelled at Gabriel first, in order to shut him up. Gabriel stopped yelling.

“They can hear you out there! Would you keep it down.”

Gabriel lowered his voice a little, but soon it escalated to that angry onslaught again. The attempt to add a whispery tone to the yelling only made the reproach fiercer.

“When we schedule you for five o’clock, you should be here fifteen minutes before, not two and a half hours later. My poor brother was cooking himself back here, for God’s sake.” That was Gabriel’s way of apologizing to Michael, always indirectly, or so their mother noticed. Their cook however was prepared with excuses.

"I told you guys, you've got to hire another cook. What if I get sick one day, who's going to cover for me. What if five or six tables come in at the same time. one guy can't handle that."

He had a point, thought Mrs. Angeli, which Michael would probably agree with, and Gabriel wouldn't understand because he had never attempted to cook before.

"One guy should be able to handle 8-10 tables at the same time," Gabriel concluded.

"Let's just chill a little," Michael tried to calm the storm although this only seemed to upset his brother more.

"Good, go on. Let him walk all over you, like the stupid that you are. He comes in an hour and a half late. Shit, we got a business to run. And you're going to let him off, like he did nothing, so that he could stick it up our ass another time," Gabriel resumed his nervous anger with Michael.

While her two sons argued, Mrs. Angeli heard the cook cleaning dishes. He was afraid of losing his job, thought Mrs. Angeli. She agreed somewhat with Gabriel's reaction. She also thought that they gave their cook too much leeway when it came to his responsibilities. They let him come in late. They let him drink during working hours. They would drive him home whenever he needed a ride. They were too nice. They treated him like a friend. They treated him too good, just as she had taught them to treat people. She had failed to teach them how to deal with different people, like employees, in a harsher world.

Although upset when he left the kitchen, Michael was happy to see his mother selecting music on the jukebox. He offered her a smile and she offered him one back. He then went to have a seat at his father's table, although this didn't seem to help his nerves much neither. To see his father confined to a wheelchair, and to the depression initially associated with it, seemed to unnerve him more than chastising his employees. Mrs. Angeli thought when she decided to join them at the table

Disguised spurts of happiness however, displayed itself on her husband's complexion that evening. He reveled in the reality that his bar was now open. He was somewhat enviously proud as well, that his sons were running his place. He would often say at the table,



“Michael. I built beautiful bar. there`s notta bar in a Niagara Falls, lika this one. I tell you.”

Everyone agreed with him, even Michael, when before he would have probably vehemently disagreed. Michael listened more instead of arguing. Perhaps it was the atmosphere of the bar, and the first time his father had talked to his son in such an environment, that pacified their similar penchants to argue. Perhaps Michael saw his father as another customer that night, someone he needed to please and make a good, lasting impression with, so that he would come back.

When most of the other strangers had left, everybody pulled up a stool at the bar. Tony and his wife seemed to enjoy themselves while Mrs. Angeli`s husband seemed at ease. He rolled his wheelchair to the beautiful oak bar he had helped build. Michael was preparing them another round of drinks. They then spoke of past personal things Mrs. Angeli never imagined she would talk about in the company of her sons, things that her brother-in-law had no qualms in relating. She realized that her husband and his brother were inseparable as children, and they were somewhat the same as adults. They were in the car recycling business together, and although Tony`s divorce and the controversy associated with it created some separation between them, they never let anything come between them, not even their wives.

So, after Michael finished serving them drinks, uncle Tony began to put his brother on the hot seat by telling his nephews stories from the past. Victorio, who looked so much lower in his wheelchair from behind the bar, was somewhat embarrassed. He crossed his hands and listened, cracking a smile every once and a while.

“Michael, your father ever tell you what this place used to be before?”

Tony seemed somewhat inebriated already from a couple of drinks.

“It was the mayor`s house long time ago.”

“No, no, no. Before, before. When we were kids. When we came over from Italy. Did you tell them, Victorio?”

Tony looked over to his brother, who was now laughing aloud.

“It was Louie the Pimp`s place,” blurted Mrs. Angeli, ruining the suspense, and acting like she was her husband`s mother with a stern look. She disliked this story but she wasn`t prepared to change the subject. Her husband was smiling.

"Whose place?" Michael was curious.

Tony and Victorio started to laugh like they had remembered an inside joke, while Mrs. Angeli maintained her motherly look.

"Okay. I'll tell you about the first time your father showed me this place."

Uncle Tony rubbed his thick hands and Mrs. Angeli listened to the story for a way another's perspective could add to the one she had already heard before, on a number of embarrassing occasions. The last time she had heard the story, her husband was walking and he had embarrassed her at a wedding table by telling it. She sat back and showed a pretended, interested smile.

It was the summer of 1967, early morning, when Victorio went to pick up his younger brother at the airport in Buffalo, New York. Victorio was sixteen and newly arrived himself, only two weeks before, while Tony was thirteen. The airport in Buffalo was closer to Niagara Falls than the one in Toronto, right across the border and about twenty minutes away.

Victorio paced about the rather dirty terminal, staring at the unfamiliar, mainly African American people. He waited impatiently for his brother. He had never been separated from his younger brother for more than three days, and now, it had nearly been three weeks, and by thousands of miles of ocean. He was somewhat alone for the companionship of his partner. He was already tired of having to put up with his older sisters, whom he lived with, without an ally.

Little Tony appeared through one of the many entranceways, with an old white and stickered suitcase in his hand. Tony was a scrawny thirteen-year-old with feathered brown hair and bony arms. He was wrapped tightly into one of Victorio's old brown suits. A fluffy shirt from underneath the suit jacket collar seemed to rise up out of the suit like overstuffed insulation.

Victorio spotted his brother immediately and called him over.

"Tony, Tony, over here."

Upon seeing Victorio, Tony shed a half smile. He then made his way to his older brother rather coolly and slowly, not trying to show any emotion. He tried to seem tough, although all he wanted to do was cry.

Victorio showed little emotion to his brother as well when he approached him and took the suitcase from his hand. They were never taught to show emotion back home in the old country. Emotion meant weakness according to their mother, and weakness was not a quality a man should learn to accept in himself. This is why she never hugged her children, or kissed them, or smothered them. They had to be raised tough to survive in a tough world.

Although they had honored their upbringing by not hugging or kissing each other, and by talking small words about the flight, and their parents, who were still left behind, Tony was happy to be in the company of his older brother again. The excitement showed in his inability to say everything about his first time flying on a jet plane, all at once.

Victorio recognized this excitement instantly, and laughed about it to himself. Wait until he sees the car I just bought, Victorio thought to himself. He escorted Tony through the front doors of the terminal.

They walked in and around cars until they came to a convertible Chevy 59, blue, except for some white bondo bodywork left unfinished on the left quarter panel. The top was down. The interior and large steering wheel were a vinyl white.

"This is your car?" Tony's mouth dropped with pride.

"I just bought it yesterday." Victorio opened the trunk to stuff the suitcase in between two spare tires.

"Oh my God, you're rich already?"

Tony had never seen such a beautiful car back in Italy, such a long car without the roof. It looked like a luxury vehicle compared to the little fiats in Italy.

"What rich! I bought it all smashed up, and now I'm still fixing it. See..." and then Victorio pointed to the work left unfinished on the quarter panel.

Victorio jumped into the car and popped open the passenger door from the inside. Tony jumped in rather quickly and excited, while Victorio coolly lit a cigarette. Victorio's styled hair with the curl in the front that almost touched his nose, moved from left to right as the wind caught hold of it. He wore a white shirt buttoned a third of the way down, tight blue pants, and ankle boots. To Tony, his brother seemed larger than life. To Victorio, little Tony seemed too small for the front bench seat. When the

cigarette was lit and the match disposed of in the wind. Victorio pulled out of the parking lot and hit the highway with speed.

Tony loved it. He yelled for his brother to go faster.

Victorio loved it as well. He yelled back to make it look like he couldn't hear his brother's requests over the speed.

They both loved one another, although they would never ever say that they did for as long as they lived, even after Victorio had cheated death by escaping the accident of his life.

Victorio drove quickly on the highway out of Buffalo and Tony was impressed and frightened by this new country of America, which he had heard so much about. There were no mountains, like in Italy, and not too many trees or little villages. There were a lot of small houses not made of stone. There were wider roads, and a border, where they had to cross a long bridge before they made it into Canada, where his brother and sisters lived.

"Tony, I gotta go to work. It's almost nine and they'll kill me if I'm late. I'll drop you off at Nilda's and then we'll go out tonight."

Victorio accelerated with power after him and Tony showed their passports at the border.

"I want to come to work too."

"You wanna come?"

"I wanna see where you work."

Tony was afraid to leave his brother's presence so soon after finally seeing him, but he wasn't about to admit it openly.

"But you got you're nice suit on. It's dirty there." Victorio laughed inside as to how much older his little brother looked in his brown suit.

"I'll change. I wanna see where you work. Where do you work?"

"It's called a body shop. We fix cars and then we paint them. It's a lot of dust there." Victorio quickly crossed the city of Niagara Falls, and drove into the neighboring township of Thorold, a little town renowned for having the Welland Canal run through it, the first ever canal built in Canada.

"I wanna come."

Victorio finally agreed without saying much. Tony could tell by the way his brother's lip curled that he had given in.

When they reached the little warehouse, where a number of mangled cars decorated the outside of it, Tony was amazed at how professional his brother had become. He followed his brother inside to where Victorio changed into a mechanic suit, to where he grabbed some sandpaper and a hose, and began to sand the rear end of a car raised on top of two upright rims. Tony watched for hours and hours how his brother sanded and sanded this spot, sometimes running water atop it, sometimes placing his hand over it to see if it was even and smooth. Tony wanted to do the same kind of work. Anything that his brother did appealed to him.

A man in a white suit entered the little garage to look around. The man appeared tall and dark to little Tony. He approached the car where Victorio was bent on one knee. Without even noticing Tony's presence, the man kicked Victorio in the back.

"Get off of the knee when you sand, you stupid Dego!" After this order, the man walked away.

Victorio looked over to Tony and with a forced, half-smile, he tried to hide the embarrassment that he might have been doing something wrong in front of his brother.

Tony didn't even think twice about it. He was so proud of his brother. He admired him for working so hard. When the day was done, and he saw Victorio once again approaching him as he did in the airport, although this time blowing his nose and picking paint dust from his ears, he shed that half smile again.

"We work, now we go home, we eat, and then we go have a good time."

Victorio slapped his brother's face and pretended to wrestle with him.

Victorio started the convertible and skidded out of the parking lot to Tony's amusement, stones rattling against the bumper. He flew by Beaver Dams, a large, water basin cut off from Lake Ontario, and used by the factories nearby to deposit their waste. Victorio pointed to a number of places by the water, one in particular, and explained to Tony his dreams.

"See that lot with the cars..."

Victorio was pointing to a piece of land, which elongated into the water. Near the bank of water was a mountain of crushed cars piled atop one another.

“That’s a wreckyard. I’m going to buy it when I make enough money.”

Although Tony was confused as to why his brother would want a business with old, junk cars, he simply smiled. This new place of Canada was strange to him, and flat.

Without even realizing, Victorio sped by an awaiting police officer, who took no time in switching on the siren. Victorio slowed down to pull over, and the cop did the same right behind him. As the heavy stomping footsteps of the cop approached, Victorio remained calm. He lit another cigarette. Tony was worried.

“How many times do I have to tell you, Victor?” The cop had immediately recognized whom he had pulled over.

“You can’t go past fifty kilometers on this street.”

“Come on Joe. My brother just came here from Italy and I wanted to show him around.”

“I’m going to have to write you a ticket, Victorio.”

The tall Irish sounding police officer nodded with an ashamed demeanor.

“Come on, Joe. I won’t do it again. Come on Joe, who fixed your car for free when you smashed the fender into a tree, and you didn’t want to tell your boss.”

“But who got you and your uncle’s friends licenses, without even having to take the test.”

“I gave you our best cheese and a whole proscuito for that.”

“Okay, Victor. I’ll let you go this time, but next time, I’ll give you a ticket. It’s my job to stop speeders and you’re enemy number one.”

“Thanks, Joe.” Victorio started the car again, and the police officer mechanically walked back to his car.

“Watch this!” Victorio turned to Tony, before he slammed the foot on the pedal and sped out onto the road again. Within minutes the police officer had pulled him over again. Tony wondered how his brother would escape this one.

“Victor, what the hell was that!” asked the police officer, oblivious to Victorio’s motives.

“Just write it up Joe.” Victorio winked to his brother. “I wanted to show my brother what it was like to get a ticket.”

“You’re one crazy wop, Victorio!” laughed the policeman as he handed Victorio the ticket. Tony probably could have told him the same thing, or stories that would allude to such an understanding of his brother. Part of the reason why Victorio was sent to Canada by his parents, was because they were worried he wouldn’t live to see his sixteenth birthday. He was a mischievous child in Italy and had found himself with a crowd who held similar, destructive habits. He had escaped death a number of times before, in Italy. One time, he drove his little Vespa off the cliff of a mountain from a long and winding road, apparently distracted by a few girls walking down, and tempted by a dare. His hobbies more or less consisted of riding this little Vespa across unsuspecting cats, in order to splatter their guts on the dresses of unimpressed schoolgirls who showed more than enough interest in him to come back again, and receive the same flirtations. Tony remembered how one time, an old lady who used to frequent the church in their village approached his mother to denounce Victorio as a cursed child. But nothing fazed Tony when it came to his brother. His brother had always put Tony first, always protected him, no matter how different in personality they were. What Tony regretted were the results his brother’s behavior would induce from his mother, who beat him mercilessly sometimes. But this didn’t stop Victorio from getting around, or causing more shit. He was too stubborn to be tamed.

They drove a few blocks to the old tenement apartment where they would now share a tiny room together. Awaiting them there, and worried to death, were their two older sisters. One struck Victorio on the nose when they entered, causing him to bleed a little bit. They knew he was a troublemaker, but they didn’t expect him to be so inconsiderate for not bringing Tony home right away. Victorio hurried to the bathroom to find some toilet paper for his bleeding nose. Tony didn’t flinch to worry about his brother. This was family. This was how their family operated. Never show love, always show anger. Anger is a way of showing love.

They then ate, all of them together, laughing once and a while, growing silent whenever someone mentioned either of their parents, especially their aging father. The brightness outside grew dark, and Victorio was growing impatient at the dinner table. He smoked continually, his mind obviously elsewhere. Tony noticed this.

“Okay, we go out now.”

“Where are you going? It’s late and he’s tired,” objected the eldest sister, Nilda, in their absent mother’s voice.

“I’m going to take him to see The Falls.”

“Go, go and change.” Victorio assured Tony that he wouldn’t receive the same punishment he had for disobeying their eldest sister. Tony quickly left the table to go to the bathroom to change.

Victorio burst into the bathroom a few minutes later, wanting to make sure his hair was perfect, only to find his brother crying. When Tony saw Victorio burst in, he tried to cover up quickly, but Victorio saw. He silently understood. He had cried a number of times himself, and for a whole week once he left his homeland to come to this strange country. He understood but he didn’t say anything. He changed the subject like he didn’t even see.

“Are you ready? Let’s go. We gotta pick up Mazza, and Tordillo.”

Tony gathered his strength, washed his face, and followed Victorio out of the apartment. They picked up Victorio’s two friends, who were waiting on a street corner smoking. Mazza had a sphere of curly hair surrounding his head, while Tordillo was a small, slicked back Italian looking bum who was never without a cigarette in his mouth, ever, even if it wasn’t lit.

They were happy to see Tony, recognizing him from Italy. They were all from the same little village. Tony was happy to see them as well, and even happier that they let him stay in the front seat. They sat in the back, continually accosting every female visible to them on the streets. But one in particular they would never jeer at, only because they feared what Victorio would do to them if they crossed that line.

Her name was Isabella, and she was a fourteen-year-old beauty, who was walking home that evening from her shorthand and typing classes. Victorio recognized her immediately and squealed the tires of the car, before he slowed down to follow her in the car. She was walking home alone. When Victorio pulled closer to the curve, she somewhat picked up her pace. Her long black hair bounced on her long wool coat. The coat didn’t seem to fit her well, and Victorio wondered whether it belonged to one of her older sisters.

“Isabella, you want a ride?”



Mazza, Tordillo, and Tony remained quiet and attentive.

Tony wondered as to why the tone of his brother's voice changed. Usually raucous and wild mannered, Victorio came across like a gentleman.

"I can't. I'm not allowed to take rides from any boys, especially you."

The young girl continued to walk ahead, almost faster than the slowing car.

"Come on, Isabella. It's a little cold tonight. I'll drive you home."

"I can't, I told you."

Isabella stiffened even further, although she wondered as to the identity of the little boy in the front seat, often sneaking a look at him, while at the same time trying to brush Victorio away.

Somewhat embarrassed by the rejection, and snapping rather angrily, Victorio turned the wheel and peeled the tires. He raced through a stop sign and past the church, and even accelerated further as he went down a little hill. Tony was a little frightened, while Victorio's friends in the back seat were accustomed to this kind of reckless behavior. They knew where he was going. They had witnessed the same ritual once before.

When Victorio reached the bottom of the hill, he slowed down considerably to drive down Front Street. Front Street was the old, downtown area of this little township of Thorold. He slowed down and a number of people waved to him, calling his name out with chummy expressions. Where had he met all of these people, Tony wondered to himself. Victorio pulled over to a curb where a number of girls in beehives and plaid skirts were enjoying ice cream cones.

"Hi Victorio." They greeted him in unison, and with coy smiles on their faces.

"Who wants to ride with me?" Victorio asked in a hurry. All of them wrestled to get in first.

"Only one. I only have room for one in the front seat. Rosalie, get in. Tony, move over and let her in." Tony did what his brother asked, all the while wondering as to his brother's intentions. The girl that squeezed next to him in the front seat was not as beautiful as the girl walking on the street. She had dark hair as well, but she wore too much scent. Tony held in his breath.

“Okay, everybody ready?” Victorio then asked, before he sped out and down the same street they came down.

Isabella had just turned the corner on her way home to the small house that she shared with her large family, and a few aunts and uncles.

Victorio sounded the horn and everybody waved to Isabella, including Rosalie, her friend from school, while Victorio offered her a vengeful smirk. It was meant to read clearly to her. He could find any girl to drive with him, any girl he so desired, and she had better respect that. She somewhat ignored the waving bunch as they came back in the opposite direction, so that they could drop off Rosalie to where her jealous friends waited.

Mission accomplished for Victorio.

“Now we go to The Falls.”

Tony giggled at his brother’s behavior. He understood his brother’s intentions, although he wondered when it was that his brother fell in love with this girl Isabella. He would never ask his brother what he was sure he could handle on his own. And as for the Falls, where they were now heading, he had partially seen it from the bridge where they crossed this morning. He hadn’t seen much of the city, and was expecting the tour. But they were going elsewhere tonight.

“Let’s go to Louie the Pimp’s new place,” begged Mazza from the back seat.

“He’s gotta new place?” wondered Tordillo.

“He’s got two places, but he just bought that old place by the Falls. Remember, it used to be the old mayor’s house,” explained Mazza.

“By the church, that place?” wondered Tordillo again, incredulously.

“Tordillo, are you that stupid? We took you there last week.”

“Oh.”

Tony listened on shyly. Victorio held the wheel with one hand while he flipped a cigarette in his mouth with the other. Tony had forgotten how much attention Victorio had taken to make sure he looked good. And he definitely looked good to Tony. He looked cool, although Tony hadn’t learned yet how to express this description.

“I know where the place is.” Victorio pressed his lips against the cigarette to make sure it didn’t fall out of his mouth. Orange ash glittered and flew away.

“You got any money, Victorio?” Mazza, still in his begging voice, slapped the car seat nervously.

“It’s Tony’s tonight.”

“I just need a little bit more, Victorio. Just a little bit more. I’ll give it back to you. You know I’ll give it back to you.”

“Easy Mazza. Easy. Louie will let you go. I’ll talk to him.”

“Thanks Victorio. Oooohh! La frenia aspeta!”

Tony finally understood what they were talking about, now that Mazza had explained it in a way that somewhat said everything. They were going to a whorehouse.

When they finally arrived and Victorio parked the car in the back, Tony heard the sound of The Falls for the first time. He hadn’t heard it this morning as clear as he did now. It was a blurring sound, although a loud and deafening one, like thunder. They went through the back door of this stone house, the former mayor’s house, and to the lounge area where a little bald man sat in front of the fire. In between his chair and the fire, and on a furry area rug, sat four women, all of them dressed in skimpy little outfits.

Louie automatically knew it was Victorio, because they came through the back door.

“Victorio, who did you bring me tonight?” The baldhead refused to turn around to show a face.

“Just Mazza and Tordillo, and my brother.”

“Your fucking brother?” The stocky little man whose tanned skin looked like worn leather got off his chair and walked around it. The girls followed in behind him when he snapped his fingers.

“Victorio, Victorio, this is your little brother? This is Tony. UN-fucking-believable?”

Tony laughed at how Louie the Pimp managed to slip the f-word in between most of his words.

“Yeah, this is my brother Tony. Tony, you remember Louie. You remember Louie?”

Tony couldn’t remember him and so he remained silent and shy like. Mazza was horny.

“Louie, I’m a little short tonight.”

“Mazza, you’re short every night.”

Victorio and Tordillo laughed. So did the girls in behind Louie.

“Hey Victorio, thank you for sending those guys from work, and those guys from Front Street, and those guys from the Mill.” Louie went on and on, and then turned his head to say something to the girls.

“This guys been here not even three fucking weeks and he knows everybody. I like guys like you, Victorio. You’re a good kid. You open your mouth, you do what you want to do, you work hard, and then you have a good fucking time. That’s the way to live, take it from you’re fucking brother, Tony.” Louie patted Victorio on the shoulders proudly. Tony was proud of his brother as well. He was well aware of his brother’s charismatic character.

“Listen, for you Victorio, because you’ve been so good to me. I’m gonna let shorty slide...”

“All right.”

“Easy, easy Mazza. Let me fucking talk. And I’m gonna give your brother first choice of the best here, on me.”

“Tony, don’t pick the Spanish one.”

“Look at this fucking guy. Mazza, I oughta slap you for stealing candy from a kid’s hand. Pick any one you want Tony.”

“Sorry Louie. Sorry Louie...”

“Shut the fuck up, Mazza!”

“Which pussy do you want, Tony? It’s your first time, I know, but it’s okay. It’s not like Italy, they don’t hide in the bush here and wait for a car to stop. They’re right here, choose.”

Louie went from girl to girl trying to promote the assets on each, squeezing the large breasts on one, grabbing the round behind of another, sticking his dirty stubby finger in the mouth of another.

Not wanting to show that he was scared, and not wanting to disappoint his brother, or insult the free offer of Louie the Pimp, Tony picked the one Mazza was

obviously intent upon. Mazza reacted of course, and insisted that he would wait, no matter how horny he was, until Tony was finished.

The scented lady led Tony to a ladder near the back door. She went up first and he saw under her skirt as they ascended to the attic. Tony noticed a number of empty bookshelves and a telescope. He didn't know it was a telescope, never having seen one in his life, although the thought of something unfamiliar, appealed to him, and put him in the right frame of mind to try what was also unfamiliar to him - the naked lady now awaiting him on a blanket on the floor. He noticed everything about her. She was a good teacher.

And his brother was proud of him on the drive home while they laughed at Mazza for not lasting as long as little Tony. Tony laughed little and was tired. In the course of one day, he had moved away from his parents to come to a foreign country where he had lost track of reality, and lost his virginity in the same night. Although he tried not to cry when he and his brother slept together on that same cot that night, he couldn't help it.

Victorio couldn't help to notice as well. It hurt him. But he knew the score and he also knew that his brother after a week or so, would not miss his real home that much. Tonight was the start of something new, a new life far away from the home they had known.

On the way home Mrs. Angeli remembered how her sons enjoyed the stories she hated. But she wasn't about to assume the role of spoiler, especially after seeing how her husband smiled throughout the night. In the car, and by the angle of the rear view mirror, she had noticed that he had quickly lost that smile. He was solemn once again. She was worried what time her sons might come home.

Mr. Angeli sat in the front seat. He regretted that better times couldn't be attained because he felt that the sleep of his legs prevented everyone from enjoying themselves fully. He was right, he was always right, most especially when he suggested to his sons, and when his wife wasn't listening, that they hire a beautiful woman bartender. A woman would keep patrons drinking at the bar, was his logic, and even Michael couldn't dispute it. It didn't take long for Mr. Angeli to come full circle. He was once again depressed into a silent brooding.

## **A Part Time Job**

The day before, Dawn had moved to The Falls from her home in Halifax, Nova Scotia. She sat alone on a bench at the bus station, an old suitcase at her side, a boxed lobster the gift for her boyfriend's parents. Her boyfriend was late. It gave her some time to fix her new, blond look. She opened her mascara mirror and went to work. The tanning salon had done well to darken her Eastern Canadian paleness, although she needed primary color. She slightly stroked her eyelids with a blue to match her eyes. She then applied a glossy flesh tone lipstick to light up her thin lips. She had hoped that the changes would surprise her boyfriend, and impress his family, whom she had never met.

The first few hours, after her tall, muscular boyfriend had picked her up from the bus station, were wondrous. He had taken her to see the most publicized natural sights of his tourist town, including the infamous and dangerous Whirlpool at the bottom of The Falls. They picnicked on a wooden cliff overlooking the sight. In the strangest foreplay she had ever experienced with him, he explained the phenomenon of The Whirlpool. He had already learned it from his father who worked at the Power Plant nearby. In the wonderful relaxed tone of a man who was about to empty himself in the woman he loved, he explained what created the Whirlpool at the bottom of The Falls.

The Whirlpool was the natural result of a mighty torrent of water rushing into a confined space and seeking an outlet. Everything that fell over The Falls, or so her boyfriend explained, found its way into the Whirlpool, where it would circle time and time again before being thrown out onto the bank or carried down the river towards Lake Ontario. When the water level was low, because of diversion for power generation, the river moved clockwise through the Whirlpool to its natural outlet. A reversal phenomenon occurred when the Niagara River was at full flow. The water traveled counterclockwise around the basin, passing the outlet. Pressure would build as the water tried to cut across itself to reach the outlet, and the pressure would force the water beneath the incoming stream.

Dawn was fascinated, and hungry for the taste of her boyfriend's hard and rippled skin. They had made insane love on a wooded cliff overlooking the Whirlpool. And as he spoke the dirty words she begged to hear from him, she could feel the swirl of

emotions inside her culminate to a shaking orgasm. It was only afterwards, when the dream lost its whirling momentum, that she wished she hadn't left home.

For upon introduction to his family, and before she settled in, she had already felt trapped by the environment of her boyfriend's overly gaudy house. Decorated with statuettes, wedding bombeliers, religious caricatures and one too many pictures of her boyfriend and his sister, the small suburban house with the pristine landscaping, scared her. She had never seen so much pride paid to detail, or to her boyfriend. In his own house he was treated like another god for worship. His entire life history was posted on the walls in the kitchen, in the living room, and all over the family room. It was no wonder he often acted from an overly inflated ego. She also felt somewhat uncomfortable living with his retired Italian mother and father, while he went to work during the day. So, upon seeing an ad in the newspaper for a female bartender, the first she came across that matched something she had already done with ease before, she decided to give it a try.

She boarded another dirt-sloshed bus, but had to walk about a block to arrive at this vine covered, stone building. It seemed to situate itself in the middle of nowhere, when it was actually in the middle of everywhere. There were a few cars parked in the front. For safe measure, she waited to see someone exit the dark building before she entered.

The lone person who strolled out was a beautiful girl, much younger than Dawn's twenty-eight years, and much thinner. Compared to Dawn's muscular legs and arms, this other girl was very feminine and lady-like. She floated out of the stone building, her brown curls bouncing on the shoulder pads beneath her pink silk blouse, her sweet smell leading the way before her, like a rose petalled sidewalk. She wore a short white skirt that emphasized the thinning of her legs to the smallest ankles Dawn had ever seen. The sounds of her red stiletto heels tapped the rock sidewalk like they were supporting the weight of a little girl.

Dawn knew that she could never compete with this girl on the basis of feminine beauty, although Dawn deemed herself more sexual than her. With this in mind, and assuming that this girl had already been hired from the confident smile she wore on her face, the one that seemed to say, "I got the job by opening my legs, so don't bother

honey.” Dawn pulled down the collar of her shirt so that the cleavage of her big bosom showed. She then pulled her panties up a little higher, before she rounded the curves of her butt, enhanced by her tight pants, with her hand. She swung her dye blond hair back and approached the window by the door, peeking in first.

A younger man sat at the bar on a stool, under the halo of one bar light. Surrounding him was a chaos of tables and chairs. Empty bottles and coffee cups were left idle on some tables making them look like miniature models of cities on a map. Dawn watched the young man from outside, for a while, attempting to catch a habit of his that she could relate to and exploit. He simply stared into the mirror behind the bar. In his right hand he held what seemed to look like the previous girl’s resume, but he wasn’t reading it. He simply stared into the mirror, and perhaps through another porthole of thought she couldn’t find directions to. Dawn wanted to see something, anything that might have given her a hint as to whether or not he liked the skinny girl whom he had interviewed. She couldn’t find a single self-esteem related gesture.

He looked so young, Dawn couldn’t help to think, over and over again, too young to be a bar owner and too innocent looking. He didn’t appear like the type to make a decision based on what he could get out of the girl sexually. He seemed too introspective, almost brooding. Tired of watching him daydream, and impatient to get things over with, Dawn finally entered the bar with conviction and approached him with a handshake.

“Hi, I’m Dawn!” She introduced herself a little too quickly and enthusiastically, she would later analyze. She almost forced him to drop the resume he had in his hands in order to grab hers.

“Hi, I’m Michael.” He extended her his hand, which was smaller than hers and soft, softer than a baby’s skin.

“Have a seat.” He pointed to a stool.

Dawn hesitated to sit for fear of not being able to wiggle her apple behind in front of him, but she did as he asked. He glanced over her resume and nodded a few times.

“You have a lot of experience, I see.”

He tried to act like he was more important than he was, it seemed to Dawn, although he was well aware that he couldn’t pull it off either. His voice was breath filled



and relaxed, and this made Dawn somewhat nervous. She felt more comfortable around men who were loud and animated in their actions, like her boyfriend. She had left her home to come to Niagara Falls in order to be with him. He had promised to marry her, and that alone, the possibility of having her own family, was all she needed in order to make the decision to leave her single mother and little brother behind.

"If we decide to hire you, can you start immediately?"

"I can start right now, if you want me to." Dawn intended to mean more with that offer, but he didn't pick up on it. She stretched back and her breasts bulged within the tight bra she wore, like fists held up to fight.

"I'll talk it over with my brother, he's my partner, and we'll let you know. Thank you for coming." He dismissed her with a handshake as if he had already hired the girl before her and he was just going through the formality of listening to another interview.

Upset at the apparent rejection, Dawn stormed out with a fake smile on her face. When she exited the stone building, she wanted to cry. She should have been pushy with someone who appeared so nice. She was going to march right back in there and tell him how much she needed the job, how much she needed the money for her independence. She dreaded the uncomfortable tensions between her boyfriend and his parents, when she was around. And she had already received the third degree from his family; how she came to The Falls with nothing else in mind but to be with their son, who had to work for his living.

About to turn around and re-enter, she heard the lock to the cedar door snap shut. She walked down a few steps, discouraged. Should she knock on the door and ask to talk to him again? He seemed nice enough to understand. At the very least, he would listen to what she had to say, which was the extent of her desperation. While these thoughts raced through her mind, she continued to walk in the opposite direction, her body persuading her differently. She stopped, and then slowly walked back. She could see herself working here. She was going to fight for this job.

However, when she approached the door for the second time, along the weedy knoll by the front arched window, she noticed something peculiar within. Michael was lying on the black leather sofa now, stomach down, his face to the side facing the back of the sofa. He lay there for what seemed like an eternity, still, like a sick dog, not moving.

his legs spread out, and the skin between the end of his pants and his socks showing. What was he doing, Dawn wondered? She knelt down a little further, just in case he happened to turn his head around and see her. She spied on him for some time, until he started to move the lower half of his body in a familiar rhythm.

She continued to watch as he increased his hip movements. At once she felt sorry for him, and flattered. But was he making love to her image or the Venus that existed before she entered. She couldn't determine, and so she sought some hint to assure herself it was her assets on his mind. Just then, as if cued, his head turned so that his chin was entrenched in the soft leather of the sofa. His hips continued to move, but now his hands gripped the sides of the sofa for extra support. He then mouthed her name in ecstasy. She could read her name on his lips, repeated over and over again. She had read the same expression on her boyfriend's lips the day before. And then he stopped. He stopped mouthing her name. He stopped moving. He curled into the fetal position, his gaze transfixed upon the window but not being able to see Dawn spying on him through the bush. He cried. He cried for some unknown reason. He cried and cried.

Dawn quickly left and hated herself for giggling whenever she thought upon what she witnessed her potential boss doing, almost sure now that she would be hired. But she didn't receive a phone call until a month later.

Dawn pressed the hold button, and then gave him her answer.

"Sure. I'll take the job, when do you want me to start."

"Tonight, at seven. And dress up."

"I'll be there."

## **Hutch The Horse Jockey**

Michael and Gabriel waited impatiently by candlelight for their new female bartender, Dawn, to arrive.

“You sure she’s going to be all right, Michael?”

“Look, when I called the other girl, she said she was going to come and she didn’t even bother to show up, or call. This girl was the next best looking one and she had a better resume.”

“I hope you’re right. Tonight should be a little busier. I told that little grease ball, Vincy, that he could DJ. He said that he’s going to bring in his crowd from Charlie’s.”

“Where he got fired? Oh, Gabriel, I don’t know if I like that guy. His father killed someone, or something like that.”

“He said he knew Dad from a long time ago, so I thought I’d give him a chance, and plus, he said he’d do it for less than a hundred bucks.”

“Did you ask Dad about him?”

“No, but listen, Michael, we gotta start spending money if we’re going to make money. You watch the difference this Friday night when our regulars see a DJ and a girl behind the bar. Dad was right, and even you can’t argue with him this time, Michael. They’re going to stay longer and drink more.”

“I hope so because we’re sinking fast.”

“Hey guys!” A cheery voice entered slamming the front door in behind her.

When Michael first saw Dawn strolling in, he was embarrassed to have vouched for her. He was expecting her to be dressed up. Friday was their busiest night, and he wanted her to make a good first impression with his regular customers, few as they might be. She wore an old, tight fitting, Harley-Davidson shirt, and even tighter fitting black stretch pants with a slight tear in the back. Michael glanced over to Gabriel to see him disapproving with a nod, while Dawn was enthusiastic to start.

“Dawn, this is my brother, Gabriel.”

“Hi, nice to meet you. Okay, what do you guys want me to do first.”

“Well, I guess, I’ll show you around first.”

Michael gave her the tour, turning back to Gabriel with a “what can you do” face, while Gabriel went to the jukebox to play some music.

Dawn however handled the pressure of taking care of both the floor, as a waitress, and the bar, as a bartender, very well, or so thought Michael throughout the night. For the first time in a long time, a social buzz filled the silence of their empty bar. Music bounced off of the old stonewalls, courtesy of Vincy the DJ. He had done well on his promise of bringing in new people, although some of his friends scared Michael.

After eleven o'clock, a Caucasian couple walked in with two Pakistani kids, around the ages of 5 and 7. These kids took a seat at the two-seater table near the pool table. The woman who escorted them inside stood by the longhaired gentlemen, who wore a leather jacket. He was preparing himself to play a game of pool.

Dawn quickly approached Michael by the bar, and pulled him aside.

"Those kids shouldn't be here, it's past eleven, and it doesn't look good to everyone else to see kids in the bar so late."

She took a few more drink orders at the bar with her eyes. Michael considered what she had said and walked over to the guy with the leather jacket. Upon closer notice, he looked horrible to Michael. He had scrapes and scars all over him, fresh ones. His nose was broken, his fists were scuffed and bleeding, and he had a large raspberry stain of scars on his forehead.

Michael wondered whether the man could notice that the very sight of him scared Michael.

"Can I help you?" He swung his thin hair around. The man apparently hadn't recognized Michael to be the boss, only a pestering onlooker.

"Excuse me sir, but my name is Michael and I am an owner of The Clift. It is past eleven and I would appreciate it, if either you or your friend, would take the children home."

The man looked at Michael oddly, as if he didn't believe this little boy was ordering him to leave. He then and rather politely agreed.

"You're right, but they're not my children. They belong to a friend of mine who is doing something right now. He'll be around soon." He turned his back on Michael and shot the two-ball in the side pocket. His opponent was this old, white haired man, with leathery skin, and a permanent picture-smile etched on his face. Michael had never seen this older man before and found it peculiar how different he looked from any of the

other people around the pool table. He was not clad in leather or snakeskin boots. Instead, he wore white sneakers, tight Levi's, and a buttoned down shirt. He was small statured and very polite in his mannerisms. He held the pool cue upright like a pro, as upright as he could stand.

"I understand sir, except that it is already past eleven, and they shouldn't be in a bar past ten." Michael pursued the man with the leather jacket, who seemed to grow annoyed with the interruption of his pool game.

"Can I finish my beer and this pool game first. I'm already down a hundred bucks!"

"Of course you can, but..."

"Okay, okay. I get the picture. Louise, take the kids outside until I finish my beer." He directed the order to a slightly overweight woman who was wearing pink stretch jogging pants and a ragged leather jacket. The woman went to talk to the children, and to help them put their jackets on. Michael returned to the bar assuring Dawn that everything was resolved, except that it really wasn't.

Michael waited behind the bar for the children to leave with the woman, but they remained still, as if awaiting a greater order. Having dressed into her coat and waiting for her brother to do the same, the little Pakistani girl, by accident, went to put her hand inside the pocket of the pool table to search for a ball. The scarred man with the leather jacket exploded. He was about to shoot in that pocket.

"Sit the fuck down!" He screamed at the two children. Louise retreated in fear as well. Michael could see, as he was sure Dawn could as well, how such a roar blew the thin hair of the children aback. The old, white haired man simply watched, agreeable looking, silently prepared to take his next shot.

The children quickly took their seats again instead of leaving. The man continued to play pool, as if he hadn't even remembered what Michael had told him earlier.

Michael looked at Dawn, and then searched the bar for his brother Gabriel, but Gabriel wasn't around. He was probably talking to Tootz in the kitchen. Not wanting to look like a coward in front of his new bar tender, Michael went over again and the man agreed politely to his request. The scarred man appeared less agitated than before now that he had released some of his frustration from losing another game of pool. Having

warned him twice already. Michael chose to wander into the kitchen as well, to check up on Tootz and his brother. He hoped that by the time he came out again the man would have already left with the children. Instead, what forced Michael out of the kitchen was the man's voice, screaming at his new bartender. Michael heard the yelling above the loud DJ music. He quickly ran over to the situation.

"What is the problem?"

"She won't serve me a drink, and I'm not even drunk yet." The man responded as if he was completely justified.

"I told him that I wouldn't serve him another drink unless someone took the kids home." Dawn quickly interjected an explanation for her actions to Michael in rebuttal.

Michael glanced back to see his brother and Tootz at the kitchen doors. They were mesmerized into inaction by the crisis.

"Excuse me sir, but I had asked you a number of times to escort the children out of this bar. We cannot serve you until they are taken home."

"You're going to throw me out now, aren't you?" The scarred man shouted out incredulously. He wanted to attract some attention. "I can't believe you're going to throw me out when there isn't anybody in here that's drinking except for me."

He did have a point. Michael thought to himself, although the man was trying to over dramatize the injustice.

"Why don't you just fuck off!" Dawn lost it, rather prematurely, giving the scarred man the upper hand in an argument he was obviously losing.

"Are you going to let your employees talk to customers like that?" The man was trying to contain a smirk on his face. He had found an angle.

Michael was confused as to what to say next, so he stuck to his guns.

"Leave the bar now!" Michael said firmly and surprised himself in doing so.

Like the victim he literally appeared to be, the scarred man announced what he felt was some kind of unnecessary abuse to the entire bar.

"She tells me to fuck off for nothing, and you're kicking me out." He distorted the situation so that he looked more favorable.

"Why don't you just leave, you son of a bitch." Dawn continued to feed his point, while Michael turned to give her a dirty look.

“What are you going to do about it?” The man now prodded her on. “Are you going to sick your little boyfriend on me?”

“He’s not my boyfriend. You haven’t seen my boyfriend, and he wouldn’t hesitate to kick the shit out of you.”

She kept arguing despite Michael’s previous hint.

“Ooooh, I’m so scared.” The man pretended to shiver. He snapped his scabbing fingers. The sign was for Louise to get everything together so that they could leave. He had something more to say to Michael, in private, before he left. He called Michael over in a side bar conversation. Michael humored him by following him. The scarred man talked calmly now, as if him and Michael had reached the same side of the argument.

“Listen buddy, lose the bartender. She’s a bitch who’ll only get worse.” He stared her down as he left.

Dawn flipped him the bird and screamed at him over the bar.

“Don’t come back asshole!”

Michael yelled her name aloud. It seemed to surprise her that he did so. In a self-justified stare, she walked around the bar and approached him a little too closely. He could smell the worn scent of her thirsty breath.

“Don’t tell me that I did something wrong, or I’m going to quit right now.” Her stare now turned from justification to disgust. Michael ignored her ultimatum to watch little Royce the daredevil take a seat at the bar in behind her. Royce was making obscene sexual gestures in behind her, ones that she would surely disapprove of if she had eyes on the back of her head, but ones that hinted to Michael that they needed her sexual presence behind the bar. The majority of the chairs at the bar were full. Even Scorpio had taken a front row seat to the strange and fantastical phenomenon that was a female, at The Clift.

“You have a drink order.”

Michael walked outside, in the back, to have a smoke. He had grown accustomed to the habit, and it relaxed him.

When he returned, little Royce had already hit on Dawn a number of times. It showed on his horny little face. His eyes were transfixed on Dawn’s firm breasts. He fed her every line in the book that night, and for some reason she couldn’t see through this

pathetic little fool to humor him. Instead, she would bite back, enough so that when Michael first approached Royce to shake his hand, Royce said to him,

“I don’t think your bartender likes me very much.”

“Well, maybe if you take your eyes off her tits, that might change.”

Despite Royce feeling a coldness from her, and despite her rude, though justified behavior, with the scarred man, Michael approved of her work, and so did many of the customers who sat at the bar singing her praises. Gabriel also liked how she organized the bar. She made certain it was always clean and the till was always balanced. Gabriel often had swooped down on it like a vigilant hawk to make sure she wasn’t ripping them off.

Scorpio was somewhat quiet with her at first, and this surprised Michael. He was not one to be shy. He simply watched her bounce from one end of the bar to the other. Michael giggled to himself at the strict attention Scorpio seemed to pay her. After watching a number of flirtations and hits fail, Scorpio then approached Michael, who now sat at the end of the bar and next to Gabriel. Scorpio asked for any information that might help him with her character, like he was doing research for a book. Michael knew little of her, and refrained from telling him that she had a boyfriend. He hoped Scorpio would try to flirt with her. He wanted to test Dawn to see if she could humor him. As expected, Scorpio approached her like he had just entered the bar, when he was sitting there for more than an hour. Thinking that he finally wanted a drink, Dawn approached him rather politely.

“Can I help you, sir?”

“Excuse me miss,” he began, while everyone silenced, “but I’m looking for a lost love of mine, her name is Dawn,” he said with that famous poker face. Dawn was obviously fooled. To Michael’s disappointment, she answered Scorpio with that intolerable, agitated look on her face.

“My name is Dawn, and I already have a boyfriend, thank you.”

“I guess you’re not the same girl, sorry.” Scorpio back stepped from his joke while a number of others laughed. He simply smiled at Dawn. He then asked her for a coffee, and went to his table for two to light a cigarette with his shaking hand. Finally



noticing the external symptoms of his many abnormalities, and approaching Michael like he had never seen Scorpio before. Dawn whispered to him over the bar.

“Who is that crazy lunatic, he tried to hit on me.” she said rather disgustingly proud.

“He wasn’t trying to pick you up! That’s Scorpio, he was pulling you leg.” Michael tried to indirectly tell her not to be so confrontational.

“He better not touch me, that’s all I know, or I’ll beat the shit out of him.” She didn’t take the hint again, and this reaction somewhat annoyed Michael, forcing Gabriel to explode in laughter.

“What’s the matter with you, how can you look at the poor guy and be threatened by him?” Michael joked.

She stared at him for a while, nodded her head, and then reversed to take a few more drink orders as if she understood. But Michael could not imagine what she was seeing through her eyes, although after the experience with that guy at the pool table, and the ever relentlessly horny Royce, who continued to harass her with stupid questions like, “do you own a Harley?” Michael understood her instinctive need to defend first. She would have to grow accustomed, as him and Gabriel had, to the variety of derelicts that strolled through those doors looking for a friend, or a fuck.

Tootz often joked that they should call the place, The Asylum, and Michael was beginning to think that he wasn’t too far off. Everyone that walked through, no matter how normal they appeared in their first impression, had a deficiency in character that would sooner or later surface, and explain why they had visited the bar alone. And so many visited the bar alone, including the older man with the white hair who took a seat next to Michael and Gabriel. He had stuck around from the pool game and surrendered the table because nobody could beat him. He introduced himself as Hutch, and his voice was loud and raspy.

“You gotta a tiger there, boys! I like her!”

Michael and Gabriel both laughed politely.

“My name is Hutch, nice to meet you. And nice to meet you too.” he addressed Dawn.

“Thank you sweetie, can I get you anything?”

“Yeah, sure, a beer in a tall glass and a shot of Canadian Whiskey in a sifter, with ice. Oh, and get yourself and the two boys here a drink too.”

“Thank you, sweetie.” Dawn complied while Michael and Gabriel appreciated the gesture.

“You kids know how old this building is?” he then asked, while a number of others, attracted by his animated voice, crowded around to listen to the expert pool player talk. Michael could feel the heavy breathing of little Royce, and the icy breath of Jordan Donne, newly arrived, in behind him.

“Pretty old!” Gabriel exclaimed.

“Thirty years ago I was invited to this place for Dinner, before I went to Churchill Downs, for the Kentucky Derby.”

“Hutch!” A voice called him from the kitchen. It was Tootz, and upon seeing Hutch he came over to shake his hand.

“You know each other?” Michael asked Tootz.

“Yeah, I told him to drop by. I saw him at the off track-betting place, but Hutch doesn’t bet on the ponies like me. He just rides them.”

“You’re a jockey?” Michael asked.

“Was a jockey, now a has been.” Hutch laughed modestly.

“Oh no you’re not,” Tootz sought to explain. “Hutch is a living legend. The old, smelly guys at the off track say that Hutch never lost a race here.”

“Is that true?” asked Gabriel.

Hutch laughed, while Tootz motioned to Dawn to bring over another drink to Hutch, from him. Hutch accepted it with a thank you, and a salesman’s smile.

“So you raced in the Kentucky Derby?” Michael then reminded him, while more people assembled around them.

“Yeah, I raced in the Kentucky Derby, and it was my last race.”

“Did you win it?” asked Royce, almost competing for some attention.

“No, and I think I was jinxed.”

“Jinxed? By who?” Michael was curious.

“By the priest who used to live across the street from the Mayor, right there.”

Hutch pointed across the street. “You know, the one who killed himself.”

Michael immediately recognized the characters in the story, having heard it already from Scorpio, but he was not about to interrupt Hutch in the midst of his story.

"A priest killed himself across the street?" Jordan was more than interested enough not to miss a part of this story. He pulled a stool and huddled around the white haired horse jockey.

"You kids are too young to know the story." Hutch took a long sip of his beer. Everyone waited impatiently for him to finish licking his lips.

"Tell it, tell it!" demanded Jordan, impatient.

"Well, like I said, the Mayor of The Falls invited me over to his house, this place, when he found out that I got a ride for the Kentucky Derby. The year was 1967, early May, when he invited me over. It was two days before I left for the Derby Festival Pegasus Parade. The parade, I would find out when I arrived, was eventually cancelled and the National Guard was called in to keep the peace that year. The year before, Martin Luther King's wife had led a sit in to protest a racial incident involving the owner of Dancer's Image, who claimed that his colt had been drugged because of his pledge of support for Mrs. King. The day after I was to race my first Kentucky Derby with Sunset, this beautiful chestnut thoroughbred. And so, I came here, to Mayor Vega's house, with a framed picture of her. She was a beautiful colt, and I knew he would like the gesture. He was a collector, Mayor Vega. He was a closet historian who loved to document his participation in the history of a place, no matter how insignificant. And so, I accepted the invitation to have dinner with him and his family. But before I went, I dropped into the church.

It was a superstition of mine. As all of you well know, a jockey has to be very light, but very strong in the upper body, at the same time. I was good at sweating away my weight, and starving myself to the bones, but I took it to another level. I would go to confession and make sure that the weight of my sins was also removed from my body. I went to confession the night before every race. I parked in the driveway and I walked across the tracks to the stone church. I went inside, dipped my fingers in the holy water and blessed myself before I tiptoed down to the echoing basement, to the confessionals. Father Ben sat in the confessional for an hour, every evening, and I knew the times by heart, not knowing exactly where or when I would be called to race next.

I walked downstairs and knelt on the other side of the two way confessional. I could see the light gleaming red on the other side. I pulled the drape, knelt on the kneeler silently, and waited. How I wish I would have waited outside the confessional.

I couldn't help to overhear the other person's confession, the conversation between the deep resonance of the priest's voice and the soft whispers of an innocent girl. I listened to anticipate the closing absolution of the priest, but he didn't know I was there. Perhaps I had starved myself too light to create a light in his booth, but he disregarded me entirely, and instead, continued his impassionate conversation with the young girl.

She cried often throughout her confession, I regret to say. More tragically, she cried because she believed herself to be in love with the priest. It was the strangest conversation I was ever privy to, but I tell you all, it was the most heart wrenching to listen to. She revealed everything to Father Ben. Instead of discouraging her, he attempted to deflect her concerns, as if the possibility of their getting together was reserved for the future, sometime. I wanted to scream through the closed screen myself, but I was too curious. I was too, damn curious, to hear more. She had written a poem for him, and the infatuation was so obvious, but Father Ben was not firm enough. He listened to everything with an open heart, like he wanted to hear everything, like he was flattered, and possibly he was. He acted like he had never heard anyone pour his or her heart out to him before, almost like he was as new himself to falling in love. At one point in the conversation, he did ask her to start keeping things to herself. He assured her that one day she would grow beyond him, to love other men, but she refused to listen to him. And then he would give up on what I thought was a good argument. Even more tragically, by the end of the conversation, he was a fool to admit his feelings towards her, like it would serve her best to hear the truth. He should have lied, if he felt that way, was what I thought afterwards. By the time he dismissed her, I had to knock for him to open the screen to me.

"Is someone there?" I remember him asking me in a trembling voice.

"Father forgive me for your sins, my sins," I went into the customary salutation.

"It's been 5 days since my last confession, and I am truly sorry for my sins."

I couldn't tell him all of them that night, and as you will see later, those sins that I left out because I couldn't trust him any more, would return to haunt me. I left, refusing

him the satisfaction of absolving all of my sins. I grabbed the picture of Sunset, placed it under my arm and walked across the tracks to join Mayor Vega at dinner.

He was a gracious host. He invited me in and the table was elaborately set. He was quite the American, that Mayor Vega, for a Canadian. He went all out, and I was not the only guest to be invited that night. Almost minutes after I had arrived, Father Ben knocked on the door. He knew it was me in the confessional and he offered me the embarrassed look of a man who knows more of your soul than even you can claim rights to. He unloosed his heavy boots and approached me to shake my hand. We all shared a glass of wine in the study, which is that area by the fireplace over there, and Mayor Vega showed us his book collection upstairs, in the attic. He had a number of books on the history of horse racing in the area. He was very gracious in his compliments towards me in front of the often-quiet priest.

Shortly afterwards, all of us took a place at the long dining table, and enjoyed a lavish, 5 course meal. After the second course, the mayor's daughter decided to join us at the table. She looked very pale compared to the leathery skin of her father. She was also very quiet and polite, a good girl. She sat across from me, but showed little interest in anything I had to say. She spoke once, and only once, and it was to offer me, but not the priest, bread. I took it reluctantly, and then it clicked in my mind almost instantly. Hers was the voice in the opposite confessional. It was she who had the crush on Father Ben, and like the immature girl she really was, she couldn't hide this from the priest or me. Father Ben on the other hand did his best to ignore her pouting attempts to show him an angry face. She left before dessert without a word, and her father was too captivated with our conversation on the Kentucky Derby to notice.

I walked Father Ben outside after dinner. I ate little and was very nervous about the race and the fact that I hadn't removed all of my sins.

"Father Ben?"

"Yes, Hutch?"

"Does God forgive the sins you forget?" I remember asking him.

"I don't know, but I'm sure he does. How does he expect us to remember everything, don't you agree, Hutch?"

"Yes, I agree," and I understood the double meaning of what the priest meant.

The very next day, I ventured to the Kentucky Derby and Sunset would give me problems from the start. She was young and energetic, and she bucked and pulled when I first mounted her at the practice track. She would grab the bit in her teeth and pull. I was worried about her when I went to weigh myself that day. When you're a jockey, boys, you have to weigh yourself about four times a day. The night before the race I was a little heavy, so I spent the entire night in the sweat room. The next day, I was a little underweight, but I didn't seem to mind adding weights to the saddle pad. I usually prefer not to. I had never needed them before, but those damn Americans made sure my weight was right on.

So, I felt uncomfortable even before I hopped onto Sunset. She was drifting, and ducking, and bearing out. I felt I had to pull her in every second. She didn't give me one second to take a breath. My forearms were clenching and because I had starved myself the night before, and hadn't eaten anything that entire morning of the race, I could feel sharp pains in my bones from the hunger. I fought through it until we reached the gate, but she didn't want to slip in. By the time I got her in, she was back to biting the bit.

Fortunately, for the both of us, she screamed out of the starting gait after hearing the gun. But it was a turf course, which meant that it had smaller and sharper turns. I'll admit it, my timing was off, but we were within the pack after the first turn and she was steadying in speed, until we reached the second corner. I tugged at her to cut the turn and she pulled back at the bit. We knocked into another horse passing us on the right. Before I knew it, she bucked me off the saddle, and seconds later a trailing horse stomped over me."

Hutch pulled some of his white hair back to show a scar that meandered from his temple, down his mangled ear. Everybody flinched back.

"I couldn't hear anything for a month, and my hearing's not much better now. I came back to The Falls with my tail between my legs, only to hear the rumor, from one who had to write it down for me, that Father Ben hung himself outside the church. The mayor had resigned shortly afterwards. I wanted to blame myself for letting them both down, but I knew the Kentucky Derby was not that important to the both of them any more."

Hutch smirked and winked at the same time, before he took a long swig of his froth less drink. Everyone else dispersed into his or her own area of the bar again, while Jordan stuck around to buy Hutch another drink.

Michael watched Scorpio half-sleeping in the corner and wondered whether he knew the details. Was Scorpio aware that his best friend had fallen in love with the young priest, and was he sure she would return.

Michael went over to Scorpio's table with a fresh cup of coffee. Startled to see him, Scorpio smiled and expressed his approval of Dawn as the new bartender of The Clift.

## **Gabriel's Wreckyard**

Above Gabriel's bed board was an unusual picture. It was a bird's eye view of an astutely severed piece of flatland. In the green center was a square brown brick building on a plot of grass. It opened up to the bordering highway with a wide asphalt driveway. Surrounding the building and extending quite a way behind it was row after row of suspended vehicles. The multi-colored vehicles appeared futuristic in the sense that they were not resting on the ground. They were jacked up on two-foot car rims. Scattered in between the rows of cars were dotted areas of stone. At the very back of the yard was a blockade of piled up cars. Beyond that wall of recyclable metal was the road that led directly through the city of Niagara Falls, and to The Falls itself. In the far left corner of the picture, in the distance, a smudge of blue designated the natural wonder. In the big picture, it appeared as if the lot of cars was a distant gateway to the natural phenomenon.

Gabriel woke up to this picture every day. And almost every day it would distract him into finding something new he had never seen in the picture before, like a place where he could belong.

Gabriel loved cars and playing music, but he went to school for business. He sat on his creaky bed, in only his underwear, while he searched for a clean pair of socks in the dresser drawer beneath a little bookshelf in his room. Stacked neatly on one side of the shelf was an array of business textbooks. Management 101, Socio-economics, Macroeconomics, highlighted for his degree, and never looked at again. Holding the books upright was a head statuette of Beethoven. On the other side of the statuette was a forgotten pile of crumpled sheet music - neglected. Gabriel had studied accounting and business administration, management and marketing, in place of Bach, Beethoven, Mozart and Schubert. And although he had been blessed with a sensitive touch for the ivory of a neglected piano, or so his elderly music teacher once explained, he had been cursed with the temper of an uptight executive angry because of a typo. His dreams were often disguised in his delusions. His desires were often masked by the admiration he held for the storybook success his father had achieved. He had little faith that the piano could take him to the same Promised Land his father had found through the car recycling business. And so, he made a choice in his heart. He would one day take over the family business.



That opportunity had finally arrived for Gabriel, with its conditions of course, and this time without the sheet music.

The conversation with his father, in an emptied, echoing kitchen was sincere. The house was empty of evidence that people lived there. The chrome kitchen sink was clean of any food stained dishes. The beige counter was wiped down and gleaming, as if awaiting a buyer. The oak kitchen table was a little dusty as was the hanging light fixture, which was made entirely of tinted glass. Gabriel's brother Michael was not there. He had left early to prepare the meat and vegetables for a cook they couldn't afford to pay to come in early. Gabriel's mother was absent as well. She had gone to the pharmacy to pick up some diapers for her husband. Gabriel's father sat at the oak kitchen table alone, having a cigarette and looking outside. He looked helpless to Gabriel. He called Gabriel to stay.

"Gabriel, come here and talk to your father."

Gabriel stopped and turned before he went to the door where his shoes and jacket were abandoned the night before. Gabriel had sensed the approach of a dead honest conversation in his father's voice. He had sensed that his father needed him.

"What is it, Dad. I'm in a rush."

"Come over here and sit down."

"But Michael is at the bar alone and...."

"Michael's okay. Me and you, we have to talk."

Gabriel's father inhaled an invisible stream of smoke from the squeezed cigarette in his thick hands, and then let the smoke release from his nostrils. He had recovered the bad habit after almost a year in the hospital, Gabriel regretted. Gabriel felt that nothing would ever stop his father from smoking again, if that experience hadn't. And so, he accepted the adage that people don't change. His father had grown back the beard and gained back the weight he had lost in the hospital. His round belly now held up his overgrown breasts.

"Gabriel, I no want you and Michael at the bar anymore."

Gabriel was astonished to hear those words. He instinctively felt the need to explain.

"But Dad, it's getting a little bit better now. We're getting busier."

“You no understand what I say. I no want you there. I never wanted you there. You and Michael have too much education to be running a bar. I worked for thirty years because I wanted you boys to work clean, in an office, making a good pay cheque. Not to hang around these bums until 5 in the morning, and to kiss their ass for five bucks. Your father did enough of that. I no want my sons to go through what I went through.”

“But Dad, we’ve worked so hard and now we’re seeing some light.”

“I no care. I want Michael out of there. He’s not right for the business, and I need you at the Wreck yard.”

Although Gabriel wanted to disagree with his father yet another time, he knew he was not as stubborn as his brother Michael. Gabriel was the son who never questioned his father’s motives or choices, and instead, accepted them to be written in stone. His father was a success. Gabriel had always felt that because of this, he had earned the right not to be questioned. Gabriel was also flattered by his father’s trust.

“You want me at the Wreck yard?”

“I want you to take my place at the Wreck yard. I want you to work as a partner with your uncle Tony.”

Gabriel was bursting with excitement inside, but he wanted to show his father that he could handle such news as an adult. The opportunity to work in an important position at the business he spent so many summers and weekends working part time appealed to Gabriel in every way. Through the years he had realized how lucrative his father’s business was, and it’s many advantages, the first and foremost being its proximity to cars. Gabriel loved cars, and he loved his uncle Tony, who was his godfather. He was excited to be asked to work with him. He was ecstatic about the opportunity. Forcing reserve, he wanted to show his father some maturity in the matter.

“Why, Dad? Is uncle Tony having problems running the business?”

“Well, Gabriel. The business, thank God, runs itself now. I want you there because we have nobody there from the family. I worked hard to start the business. I built the business for you guys. It’s a waste having you at the bar when we have a good business to run, and it needs to be pushed. It needs a good young man like you.”

“But what about Michael?”

“Michael wants to go back to school, I think. He’s not finished. And if he wants to work at the Wreck yard too, he can work there, but at least he doesn’t have to put up with these bums every night. I never see you two any more. What kind of life is this? A man is stuck in a wheelchair and on top of that he can’t see his sons.”

“What are we going to do with the bar?”

“Mama got some calls today. A man was there the other night and he liked it. He wants to buy. If we can sell it we sell it. That’s what we wanted to do anyways.”

“Okay, Dad. I got to go to the bar. I’ll tell Michael and we’ll talk about it tomorrow.”

“No tell Michael anything, yet. Let’s talk to this guy first and we see.”

“Okay, Dad.” Gabriel went over to his father and embraced him.

“I love you, Dad.”

“I love you too, now go, before your brother gets mad.”

With a hop in his step, Gabriel scampered out of the house. He sped in his car in the direction of his father’s car recycling business, which was on the way to the bar. Relieved that those long nights at the bar would soon end, he thought upon the possibilities of his future at his father’s Wreck yard, and dreamed of the same financial success his father had achieved. Gabriel was well aware that although his uncle Tony was a partner in the incorporated business, his father was majority shareholder. Gabriel indulged himself in the responsibility of filling his father’s shoes, but knew he would have to prove himself first, like in any business. He sped faster through the peeling walls of a tunnel, which supported the Welland Canal above it. Gabriel didn’t bother to lower the volume on the radio. The sounds fuzzed out. He then took the all too familiar turn near the industrial park and by the paper mill, before he saw from the adjacent highway, twenty two and a half fenced in acres of half stripped cars – a sheet metal graveyard. Creating a heavenly glow in the lot was the sun, which gleamed off of windshields and rear view reflectors. Gabriel approached the lot in his car and felt at home.

Before he entered the office building at the front, he decided to take a stroll around the car lot on foot. He walked by rows and rows of misfit cars and remembered happier times in his family’s life. Him and his brother Michael, when they were younger, would arrive with their mother on Saturday, sometimes after school. She would leave

them to wander in the car lot, and they would always manage to find a lot car they could teach themselves to drive with. Sometimes the car would be missing a hood, sometimes a door, but the missing parts, the sold parts, only made the adventure more fun.

They would often follow the characters their father had hired for minimum wage. The yardmen would impress him and Michael with use of the blowtorch, which they utilized to tear off a bumper or an axle. The yardmen were almost always, never shaven, but always characters. Gabriel and Michael could never grow attached to one, because they would rotate in and out like the dusty wind, which caught hold of the creased dirt in the Wreck yard.

Gabriel remembered how on one occasion him and Michael had gone on a scavenger hunt in each of the cars, for things they could take home and use as toys. After having collected a number of miscellaneous hood ornaments, rear view mirror trinkets, and whatever was left in the glove compartment of some cars, their mother chided them for wanting to bring the junk home. They were forced to leave what they had found there, but they would almost always take home a funny story on how they had found some marbles, or a watch, or some other article, which told the story of the person who had previously owned the car before it was now buried in the car graveyard.

Gabriel remembered those days fondly. He walked through the maze of cars, greeting those yardmen whom he recognized, and introducing himself to those who were new. He finally made his way back to the office. His uncle Tony, who was in the back office behind the long desk of phone salesman, was eating take out lunch with his second wife. Michael snuck up on them for a second before revealing his presence. They were flirting, or rather, his uncle was flirting. His chubby uncle was dressed in a tool jacket and tight fitting jeans and work boots. His face had bloated somewhat from the last time Gabriel saw him. His uncle's second wife, Kathy, was overdressed to work at the Wreckyard. Her blond hair was done up and styled, like she had just returned from the hair stylist. She was wearing too much make up, Gabriel, thought, and a skirt and heels not appropriate for working in a dirty area. Gabriel's uncle Tony finally noticed him, and reacted with shock, like Gabriel had scared him.

"Gabriel. What are you doing here?"

"I hear you need a new partner?" Gabriel giggled. When Gabriel joked he often clapped his hands and shuffled his big feet. In the dressier clothes he wore to the bar, he also felt over dressed for the environment of his father's business.

But his uncle Tony was not amused, or rather, he didn't seem to get the joke.

"Your father sent you here? What about the bar?"

"My father wants me to come and work at the yard more. A few people are interested in buying the bar and he wants me to take his place here."

Not hearing this conversation, and strangely gathering up the mess left by the wrappers on the desk, uncle Tony's wife said little to Gabriel until everything was cleaned up.

"You're not working today, Gabriel?"

"Yeah, I'm heading over there right now. I just wanted to pass by and say hi."

The two phone salesmen in the area before the office were busy. Gabriel was content to hear phones interrupting his conversation. He was content to hear how busy his father's business was. He was anxious to be a part of it.

"Did you come to pick up something?" Uncle Tony's wife then asked Gabriel.

"No. I was just coming by because..."

"Kathy, can you get me the ownership for the '95 Buick regal from Zurich Insurance. Terry is on the phone and he's waiting to see if it's been released." a salesman interrupted Gabriel to ask Kathy a question.

"Listen, Mike. I'm not a fucking secretary, you understand me. Go ask Susan upstairs."

Gabriel was surprised to hear his uncle's wife treat their top salesman in that manner. He had simply asked her for some help and she had unnecessarily abused him.

"I'll go and check for you Mike."

Gabriel motioned to help and saw how his uncle's second wife disapproved. Gabriel walked upstairs and felt his uncle Tony's deep brown eyes, the match of his father's, watching him. He then went to the desk where the car ownerships were filed and pulled out a little red box, not before he greeted Susan the secretary, politely. She was a blond woman with acne scars on her face and fizzled hair. She was very busy at the computer.

In a matter of minutes, uncle Tony had rushed upstairs. He went to Susan's desk first and quietly whispered something near her ear, while Gabriel was looking for the car ownership. Gabriel finally found it, closed the red box and went downstairs again. He felt his uncle's eyes on him again. He found the same look in Kathy's eyes when he handed Mike the salesman the ownership.

"Thanks a lot Gabriel. When are you coming to work here again?"

"Very soon, I hope." Gabriel felt an unordinary tension develop between his uncle, who was now at the bottom of the stairs, and his uncle's wife, who was staring directly at him from the office. Their flirting stares had disappeared and were replaced by worried, almost disappointed looks.

"I got to go, see you later Kathy. See you, uncle Tony."

"See you later, Gabriel."

Before Gabriel started his car, he reviewed how uncomfortable he felt at his father's business, without his father. It seemed like he had walked into another's house and made himself too comfortable by walking to the fridge, taking out a beer, and sitting on the person's best furniture. He started the car and drove away from the lighted sign with the slogan, "We buy scrap cars." As he did so, he dismissed the intruding thought that his uncle had assumed the business was now his.

## **The Inability to Say No**

Around ten thirty, Monday night, a rather chubby, middle-aged man with thick glasses and clumpy brown hair strolled into The Clift. He was wearing a yellow golf shirt and thin white pants. He resembled a tourist, although he didn't appear foreign. He approached the bar slowly with an uneven walk. He browsed around very interested, as if noticing the dust that had compiled on the stools, tables, and seats, from lack of business. This scared Michael, to know that this stranger had recognized him to be the only one working. Luckily for Michael, Tootz had left the lights on in the back. The gas-powered fryers in the kitchen would heat up randomly, making it seem like there was someone working in the kitchen.

When this stranger finally made it to the bar, he placed his right forearm on the heavily stained oak armrest. He continued to look around before greeting Michael. He ordered his drink with a familiar, twangy accent, which echoed against the stonewalls.

"A double shot of rye and ginger." He pressed an American twenty on the bar.

Michael pulled the Canadian Whiskey from the house liquor and made the drink in front of him, on the bar. He didn't want to turn his back on him for some reason. Something rubbed Michael the wrong way about this gentleman. The man continued to survey the area.

"Nice place, nice place. Do you mind if I look around?"

"Sure, go right ahead."

Michael had no choice but to let him. The tourist downed his drink and slapped the bar where his change was scattered, in order to signal to Michael that he wanted another. Michael made the drink, all the while watching him arrogantly saunter around the corner, towards the rest rooms, like an appraiser. Michael heard two doors open and close, one after the other. Was he checking to see if anyone was in the washroom. Michael thought to himself. He came once again into view by way of the dance floor. He then slowly returned to the bar, where he downed the drink waiting for him there like it was water.

"You know, I've been here before." He licked what remaining alcohol was left on his lips with a thin lizard's tongue.

"Really, when? We just opened a few months ago." Michael had never seen him in the bar before.

"Oh, not recently, a long time ago, when I was younger, like yourself, about thirty years back. Used to be something else back then." He smirked and winked at the same time, making a ch-ch sound.

"Listen, what time are you open till?"

The man motioned like he was about to leave.

"Two o'clock."

Michael wanted to close up early that night. He had already sent Tootz and Dawn home early, to save money, and Monday's were usually their least busiest day. Gabriel was canvassing the area with advertisements. But Michael couldn't resist the value of the American dollar, which, compared to the Canadian dollar, was by far more superior.

"I'll be back soon. You said two o'clock, right?"

"Yes."

"Give me one more for the road." He smiled. Michael made him the drink and the man paid him for it. Just about to drink it, he put it down and smiled at Michael again. Such a harmless facial gesture made Michael nervous.

"Can you hold it for me, behind the bar, until I come back?"

"Sure."

He left in a hurry, and Michael was left all alone to supervise his drink. Would he come back, Michael considered to himself a number of times. Was Michael supposed to wait there the entire night for the possibility of his return, or should he have just closed up early? The man returned about an hour later, with a recent acquaintance.

When they walked in, the American separated from the prostitute to come to the bar. She went straight for the bathroom. Michael watched her walk directly to the rest rooms like she had known exactly where they were. Michael found this somewhat strange, considering that no one else could ever find them on his or her own, without asking first.

The American tourist had a nervous jump in his step now. He slunk to the bar and asked for his drink. Michael lifted it from under the bar. At the sight of it, the man



winked again, as if to thank Michael for saving it. He then asked for an ashtray and some matches. By the time Michael fetched him the matches, a cigarette was already in his mouth, waiting to be lit, and a green fifty was on the bar, ready to be broken.

"Can you get me two more of these, and four shots of Sambuca? And can you bring it over to the table over there? My hands are full."

When he mentioned his hands, Michael instinctively focused upon them. One was holding the ashtray and matches, the other, the warm drink and a wedding band. It caught Michael's attention like gold would miner's in a coalmine. The man was married. And the lady in my bathroom, who had taken more than enough time to exit, was definitely not his wife. When he left the bar to go to the table where he had pointed to, Michael noticed the American fifty staring at him on the bar. With the exchange, it was worth 75 dollars to him. When he picked it up, Michael saw the prostitute over the bill, leaving his bathroom to join the expectant man at the table. She was a white blond with black roots, and she wore a black zebra dress with pinned slits on the side. The dress barely did well to cover the particulars. It definitely clashed with the yellow cowboy boots she was wearing. Michael looked over to them, and felt guilty for holding the fifty in his hand. The man caught his stare and yelled.

"How about those drinks, bud?"

Michael had almost forgotten. He quickly made the drinks, got the man's change, put everything on the tray, and delivered.

"Would you mind lowering the lights and shutting the shades, bud, thanks." The man already assumed Michael would do it. Surely Michael couldn't refuse his only customer on such a horrible night, or so the man must have thought. Michael did as he was told and returned to his post behind the bar. Odd man out.

Michael watched, like a voyeur, the tourist push the drinks on her. He called Michael every so often to bring another four or five different shots, handing him a fifty each time he left them alone. They played pool. They played the jukebox, even danced. They played the moment. They played Michael. And every time Michael went to the till to put another fifty in, he wanted to vomit then and there. But he couldn't. He needed the tourist as much as the tourist needed the secrecy afforded to him by their lack of business.

Fog settled into the parking lot outside and Michael despised it because it only

made things easier for him. He was getting all the breaks. His wife was probably waiting at some hotel room, worrying sick that he might not be all right. Michael wanted to kick him out. He wanted to tell them then and there that he didn't need their business, or the guilt associated with it. He wanted to tell the American tourist to fuck off, but he couldn't. The exchange rate was too good to pass up, too helpful to a place that was already in the hole for having to pay a cook forty dollars for doing nothing that night. But something else happened instead. The man approached the bar with that growing smirk on his face and with a request.

"Listen bud, can you watch our drinks. We gotta go somewhere."

"Where are you going? I was going to close up."

Michael finally said what he should have said in the first place.

"I thought you said you were open till two. It's not even one, yet."

The man was obviously disappointed.

"Well," Michael choked, "how long are you going to be?"

"What's it to you, bud? It's not what you think?" The man somehow felt the need to explain.

"I'm not thinking anything."

"Good boy."

The tourist sent his hand over the bar and Michael reluctantly shook it. Between his fingers was another American twenty.

"That's for you."

Michael took it and held it in his hand. It was a slimy bill, made wet from his clammy hands no doubt, and sweeter by the residue of the spilt alcohol on his hands.

They left into the fog and Michael couldn't tell from behind the bar, which direction they took.

Michael waited for them, and waited, and counted the American bills in the till, including the recent addition of the twenty. He and Gabriel both agreed that when, if ever, they received tips, they would throw them in the till and split the extra money afterwards. They hadn't enough money in the bank yet to pay themselves cheques. The American bills in the till on this abandoned Monday night amounted to over three hundred dollars. Michael felt like he had sold his soul to the devil. Around five to two,

Michael decided that the American tourist and the supposed prostitute weren't going to come back. He went to clear their table, where a number of drinks remained full. He cleared the glasses and found another twenty under one of the drinks, soaked in liquor. It was then that he heard a car squealing from behind the building, but exiting from the front. Michael rushed out of the bar to see if it was Royce's car. It wasn't. Two used condoms and a few cigarette butts was all he found the next day when he cleaned up behind the bar. He felt he was living the life of a pimp.

## **Dufferin Island**

Priscilla waited like a lady for the owner of The Clift to open the car door for her. The elegant mauve dress she had rented from a thrift store down the street itched her in places she couldn't scratch in front of him. Her aunt's stiletto heels, which she stole for the night, stubbed her toes. At times she felt a release and wondered whether her foot was bleeding somewhere in her shoe. As long as it didn't soak through to the top, she worried.

He scratched the passenger door before he managed to slip the key in and turn the lock. She saw the lock lever rise inside. His trembling hand slipped under the door handle to open it for her. She offered him a half smile. She feared he would see lipstick or something worse on her teeth. She let her round backside brush up against him as she edged between him and the door.

Moments earlier she had seduced him on his turf and got away with it. Partially that is.

When the car started and the shift released into its gear, Priscilla lowered the sun visor. She flipped open the lighted mirror and went to work on her oily face. Her lipstick was a little smudged but none was visible on her darker skin. Her chestnut hair was a little flat and the color above her eyes duller. She touched up her face like an artist would to a painting left unfinished. The conversation in the car had stagnated. Her driver attempted to find a radio station, which would break the tension.

Priscilla felt like she held the upper hand, or rather, felt like she held him there, in the palm of her hand. But she wondered why he had stopped her earlier. They were about to make love on the couch in his quaint little bar.

She had planned everything beforehand. Last week she had strolled by The Clift with her older cousin Adnan. Her mother had sent her from Pakistan to Canada because she felt Priscilla needed to see what family she had in a land of better opportunity. She sent her away on a pretended vacation, hoping she would never return. Adnan wanted to show her The Falls from the "best viewpoint", and only he knew where that was. He had made her walk uphill for more than a block and they finally arrived at this stubbly cliff overlooking the horseshoe shape of The Falls. She was slightly amazed to see such fluid beauty but was more concerned about the beaming summer sun. She was worried about her skin. She was worried that if she managed to bathe in the sun any longer she would

grow darker and everyone in this new country would know she was a foreigner, or even worse, an East Indian. Her cousin was oblivious to her greater concerns but he was also hot and sweaty. He wanted to stop for a drink and the closest spot for them to get one was a little old building on the very same cliff. They both entered The Clift that day and were the only ones sitting at the bar when a tanned fellow rushed from out of the kitchen to serve them. Priscilla had first assumed that the man was also Pakistani, but from the Mediterranean décor of his business, she quickly dispelled that notion. The young man did not ask for identification. Instead, it seemed as if he was desperate for them to drink more.

She had met him for the first time that day, but forgotten his name ever since, despite reminders. She would return, night after night after that brief meeting. Her cousin Adnan also liked the place but he was very protective of her in the company of other men. He made sure to drive Priscilla home before twelve. She would sneak out of her guest bedroom window and run back to have a few more drinks. She met a few women there, who became her temporary friends.

He kept driving, searching for a place to park his vehicle. He drove her towards the bright lights of Clifton Hill, a place her cousin had already shown her. Perhaps he was trying to impress her by showing her better action and more people, who continued to walk the lighted area even at this late hour. She didn't care much about them and was tired of relating to their tourist ambitions. She wanted to be pleased. She wanted to be broken, and she wanted it to happen tonight. Perhaps he was stalling.

He lit a cigarette and lowered the window to protect her from the smoke. He hadn't said much since they left the bar. After he had driven down Clifton Hill and almost into The Falls he finally made his way slowly toward darker, hidden areas. The windshield of his car was sprayed with the mist from The Falls and he employed the use of his wipers. She felt like they had driven through a perpetual rain area and she hoped it wouldn't cool him off. Once again she worried if he would go through with it. Why couldn't they have just stayed at the bar? They had their privacy there. Everyone had left. Everything was going according to plan until he stopped her. Could he have figured everything out? Was she too conspicuous?

She had arrived at The Clift around eleven thirty tonight with a brilliant excuse for being alone. It was very busy. She knew his blond, bitchy bartender would be there tonight. It was Friday and he needed her help. When Priscilla first entered The Clift, like Lauren Bacall in a Film Noir film, in her long elegant gown, she carefully made her way to the bar area and to the seat she had reserved for herself. She felt the gawking eyes of an old man noticing the way she maneuvered her hips. The bar owner, who was sitting at the table with the old man, noticed her as well. He waved to her and she swung her jet-black hair back before she slyly gave him a finger crawling wave.

When she approached the bar, Dawn, the bartender, rudely approached her.

“Where did YOU come from?”

“A wedding.”

“Where?”

“Down the road at The Americana.”

“Where is your date?”

“He dropped me off, and he’ll be coming shortly.”

“What would you like?”

“A Frisky Witch.”

“I don’t know how to make that, is there something else I can make you.”

“He can make it. He made it for me last night.”

Almost on cue, and as if reading her mind, the bar owner approached her from behind. His brother was nowhere to be found tonight. She would settle for either one.

“Let me guess, you want a Frisky Witch again.”

“Please, sweetie.”

“Right away beautiful, but I already forgot how to make it. Dawn, can you get me the Bartender’s Bible. I think it’s in the top drawer, and make Miss Priscilla here a Frisky Witch.”

“I like the way you make it.”

Dawn offered her a dirty, disbelieving look but Priscilla didn’t care. As long as the beau was captivated by her flirtations, that’s all that mattered.

“Okay, I’ll make you read.”

“Deal.”

Priscilla grabbed the Bible from Dawn's unsuspecting grasp and began to read in a sultry voice.

**FRISKY WITCH**

*1oz. Vodka*

*1oz. Sambuca*

**Directions:** *Pour over ice in old-fashioned glass. stir. Garnish with a black licorice stick.*

**History:** *Vodka has humility. By law, vodkas produced in the United States must be colorless, tasteless, and odorless. Because of its purity, vodka will graciously assume the characteristics of whatever it is mixed with. Vodka means "little water", a diminutive of the Russian word for water, voda. It is believed that the spirit originated in Russia sometime in the fourteenth century. In the days of the czars, Russian vodka was made from potatoes. Today it is made from grain. Vodka is filtered through charcoal to remove any remaining hint of flavor.*

"I didn't know that about Vodka, did you sweetie."

"I read it last night, but no."

"That's very interesting, don't you think."

"Yeah, sure, there you go. I hope it tastes the same way."

"I'm sure it will."

Priscilla took a sip and although the drink was a little more bitter tonight she showed him a grand smile.

"Oh shoot. I've gotten lipstick all over the straw. Do you have a napkin?"

"Of course, I do."

He quickly found a napkin and handed it to her. He then watched her delicately clean the lipstick off the straw.

"Thank you."

"No problem."

"So where did you come from tonight? You're all dressed up."

"I came from a wedding." Priscilla repeated her lie and smiled to Dawn so that she would believe her a second time.

"Where was the wedding?"

"At the Americana."

"Who did you go with, your cousin?"

She pouted purposefully and then frowned.

“What. I’m not pretty enough to have a date?”

“I didn’t mean it like that. I was just wondering where your date might be.”

“He said he had to do something and he would be right back.”

“Really.”

She got him. He couldn’t help show her a regretful face after hearing that she might have found a boyfriend. Just last night he had asked her the same question and she had said no. In order not to give herself away, she sipped her drink slowly while he went into the kitchen. She sat there for the next three hours, sipping the same drink. She was worried that he would notice that she hadn’t any money left. She had already used up her savings for the week. She had found a part time job as a motel room cleaner and she hated it. But it did pay her money, and it did provide her with some adventure. Every day she would find a new surprise in the room she was supposed to clean. One time she found blood on the sheets, a few spots and then one big spot. She realized what had happened and felt envious.

Everyone had almost filed out of The Clift before the last of her drink was finished, including his bartender. The only patron left in the bar was the old man. He lurked in the shadows and seemed to spy on her secretly with his half-closed eyes. Why was he still there and would he ever leave? He was there even before she arrived.

She watched the bar owner, whose name she often mistook for his brother’s, clean the tables of empty drinks and beer bottles. He knew she was still there and waiting, yet he put on this strong façade that he had to work. Maybe he was waiting for the old man to leave as well.

He seemed to ignore her presence when only hours before she seemed to arouse every sense in him. She rose to excuse herself to the bathroom and he flinched.

“Are you leaving?”

“I have to freshen up.”

She glided by him purposely so that he had to fight the wonderful smell of her perfume passing him by. She also straightened her back and pointed her developed breasts. She hoped he could see her peaking nipples through the mauve cotton. She wore no bra underneath, just a slip.



When she reached the bathroom she had nothing to touch up. Instead, she paced around the area trying to waste time. She noticed left over blush and powder on the bathroom sink, and long strands of hair everywhere. The small bathroom smelled of a mixture of perfumes while the toilet floor was strewn with a number of tampons and thrown away lipstick encasings.

Taking a final breath and then going back to touch up her lipstick she left the bathroom with a confident stride. Before she entered the bar area, she watched the bar owner wake the old man at the table. She stood hidden around the corner while the bar owner first cleaned the old man's table. He then offered the old man a coffee but the old man refused. She listened to their conversation.

"Scorpio, can you hear me?"

The old man didn't answer. He buried his chin in his chest and twitched.

"Who did this to you?"

The old man refused him an answer again.

"How can I help you if you don't let me? I try and try and sometimes I think you talk to me like my father does, like you have to hide things in order to protect me. I'm not a kid anymore. I can take it if you want to tell me. I want to know what happened to you."

The old man awoke startled.

"I have to go for a walk."

She grew excited now that he was about to leave.

"Scorpio, if you want to stay you can stay. I'll wait for you."

She frowned, disappointed.

The old man awkwardly raised himself and drunkenly turned towards the door. He didn't say goodbye. He seemed angry.

"Scorpio, I didn't upset you, did I?"

He didn't answer. He just left and the bar owner locked the doors behind him. He watched him as if he had forgotten there was a beautiful woman in his bathroom waiting to seduce him. She sensed her cue and from the stage area she over exaggerated her stiletto steps so that he would turn around. He didn't immediately. He was still transfixed on the silent steps of the old man who had departed from the bar.

Michael, or was it Gabriel, approached her rather awkwardly, dropping his Bartender's Bible on the way. She giggled and pulled back her long brown hair, so that her bust was more revealed. She stopped at a distance from him, near the edge of the dance floor. She wanted him to see her as a vision floating in the midst of the dark, like an angel or a spirit. She wanted him to approach her like a desperate man in need of absolution, in need of the blessings of her body.

He said little when he reached her. He simply stared at her for the longest of moments. They instinctively attacked one another in a feverish fit of passion. They moved, backward, sideways, and step over step to the lounge area, their lips refusing to separate.

The fire in the corner of the lounge area had died down. There remained a refusing glow to the ashy bottom of a few logs that continued to radiate heat. Smoke from the blown out vanilla scented candles on the tables filled the air.

Almost immediately, he reached for her breasts, which remained very firm within his grasp. But then she suddenly assumed the role of the aggressor. She pushed him onto the couch. As he lay on his back, she began to tear off his shirt, kissing him all over with her newly lipsticked lips.

Working her way down, she yanked down his pants. He tried to involve himself more in the experience but she pushed him back down with her left hand. She obviously knew something he did not, or recognized a want in him that he had never recognized before this night. She proceeded to pull the remainder of his clothes off. He was completely naked on the couch, the blinds of the window were open, and she had left him only with his socks on. He shivered noticeably.

Instead of taking off her clothes, she began to play with his hardened organ, eventually preparing it for her mouth. She would impress him with this, she was sure. The experience was quickly orgasmic. She took his semen into her mouth and spread it along the rest of his body. With a smirk, she then made her way back to his lips. He seemed to disdain the thought of ever kissing her again. Every time she tried to kiss him on the lips, he swerved or ducked or kissed her neck. She was confused at this reaction. Perhaps he was impatient. She began fondling his organ to rekindle an encore.

“What are you doing?”

“I want you.”

She took off her panties and was going to insert his penis herself, under her dress and within her. The bar owner objected and slipped away from underneath her.

“No, I can’t.”

“What do you mean, you can’t. I know you want to.” She dipped her pointed tongue in his belly hole.

“I can’t do this. I can’t believe we are doing this in my father’s bar.”

“What’s wrong sweetie, don’t tell me you’ve never done it before.”

“I can’t right now. Not here. Not here, and besides, I don’t have any protection.”

“What, you think I have a disease or something.” She was unexpectedly insulted.

“You’re the one who owns a bar, and now I’m some kind of slut that goes from bar to bar spreading diseases, is that what you’re trying to tell me. Is that what you think I am?”

“No, I didn’t mean it like that.”

A long, uncomfortable silence separated their attached bodies. She was thinking. She grimaced at him in disbelief. She grabbed her purse and motioned to leave. She left her underwear behind on purpose. As she expected, he picked it up and followed her naked to the door. He begged her not to leave.

“Let’s go somewhere else.”

And so they were now turning into a darker u-shaped area near the International Control Dam. The Dam, or so explained her cousin Adnan the other day, unsuccessfully slowed the flow of cascades and rapids before they descended The Falls. It was an attempt to stop the erosion of the area that absorbed the plummeting waves at the bottom of The Falls. The area opposite The Dam was named Dufferin Island, or so read the tourist sign. Priscilla noticed that Dufferin Island was a slight deviation in the Niagara River, which surrounded this little island in the middle like a moat to a castle. Scattered within the moat were other tiny islands and surrounding the area were tall, harrowing trees, which had slid down that edge of the softer escarpment because of mudslides. She noticed, even in the dark area, their roots protruding through the ground, even folding over each other above ground. The trees themselves appeared like they were about to fall over any second.

The bar owner stopped the car on the right side of the road, on the bank of the water, and shut the engine off. He looked straight ahead. He refused to look at her.

“What is it, sweetie?”

“Why do you call me sweetie? Is it because you don’t remember my name, or are you just confused?”

“I call you sweetie because you’re a sweetheart.”

“Yeah, a sweetheart.”

In an attempt to distract him from obviously finding her out, she pulled her skirt up and opened her legs for him to see. She then touched herself there. He refused to look at her.

“I don’t think I can do this anymore.”

“Why not?” She assumed a child’s voice in order to sound innocent of any bad intention.

“I don’t know if I really want this.”

“Have you considered what I want?”

“You don’t even remember my name.”

Priscilla lowered her skirt and turned away from him. Would she get away with another angry impersonation? She thought of an alternative.

“What *do* you want?”

He was silent and pensive, like he was holding something back that embarrassed him. So, she attempted to speak for him.

“Sweetie, I want you. I want everything of you, tonight. Look at me.” and she pulled his head gently to face her. She saw a recognizable face. She saw her face in his eyes, her inexperience in the way he couldn’t keep his face still. She saw someone as lost and indecisive as she was. She was impatient. She was about to leave him alone in the dark with this feeling.

“Can you drive me home?”

“Sure.”

She sat quiet and reserved in the passenger seat as he meandered the car around Dufferin Island and along the edge of the escarpment, which bordered The Falls. She knew he would eventually question her disappearance when she wouldn’t return to The

Clift. She knew he would ask around for her, possibly change his mind, and attempt to seek her so she asked instead to be dropped off a block away, at another, safe looking home. She never wanted to see him again. She never wanted to experience the rejection of not being taken when she made herself vulnerable with an offer. She understood the consequences well and the rumors that would follow, the rumors that are really true but unbelievable in their delivery. The rumor that identified her as an ambitious fifteen year old, under every age limit liable to law, wanting to convince herself that she could love, wanting to lose her virginity.

## Daredevils

Royce barreled his brown Tornado into a parking spot outside his church - the strip joint - to fix his appearance. He lowered the rear view mirror so he could see more of himself. He started with the hair first. He was having one of those days when that reliable brush he often kept in his back pocket wasn't performing. He brushed his hair hard and strong and the desired feathered effect refused to show. He gripped his goatee mustache with his little hand and attempted to pull it down. It was starting to curl. Meanwhile, he searched for his cheap cologne in the spilling glove compartment. Finally finding it, he flipped the cap off with one hand and doused his neck and face with the strong scent. His eyes were a little watery and he coughed from having slapped on too much. Waving the air in his car with one stubby hand, he grabbed his leather jacket from the backseat with the other, and slipped it on like a glove. It was worn and ripped in some places but it contrasted well with his acid washed jeans. The black leather made his fake leather belt stand out, while it complimented his snakeskin boots. He pulled out his replicated gold necklace making sure the charm was noticeably visible. It was a slightly chipped barrel, a daredevil's barrel. He was ready to go in and conquer.

His friend's strip joint was still under renovation on the outside. Pieces of wet plywood with green spray paint were now webbed in wire mesh and soon to be covered by smooth stucco. The music on the inside, which was loud and thumping made the boards rattle. When Royce entered, he walked through a long, dark tunnel, lined with spotlighted pictures. In between historic, black and white, replicated newspaper portraits of men and women standing proudly next to barrels, were air brushed posters of half naked women with seductive looks. His friend Jerry, who owned *Daredevils*, had borrowed one of the most popular, historic aspects of The Falls to run a theme through his exotic dancing establishment. Royce was entranced by the name of the Stripjoint and so obsessed by the associations of daredevils and gorgeous women that he often lied to the strippers inside when they asked him why he wore a barrel charm on his necklace. He would further the lie by claiming he was really a daredevil himself, waiting for the most opportune time to stage his first, and famous fall. He had gone so far as to develop the persona, and almost mastered the walk of a local celebrity ready to happen.

He had studied each and every detail from the pictures in the tunnel. He had purchased each and every souvenir in some way related to a daredevil. He had read successful stories of men and women challenging The Falls, even some where the challenger perished. But the story of a man who died before he went over because his barrel's design was made of rubber tubes tied by wire mesh and rope, or another story of the man who went over with his dog but died once he reached the bottom because his dog's nose plugged the air hole on the barrel, did little to frighten Royce and more to amuse him. Those were the ones stupid enough to go over.

He read these snippets of history only to be fascinated with the fame that could easily be achieved by one, bobbing voyage. Royce went so far as to build his own barrel from a yellow, tin garbage can, onto which he painted his name in crayon strokes. He had someone take a picture of him in front of the barrel. He kept that picture in his wallet, always. It would help him pick up women, which was every daredevil's real motivation, or so thought Royce.

The bald bouncer at the doorway, with the horn-trimmed beard, immediately recognized him.

"Listen Royce, don't harass Jerry today. I swear, he'll fucking kill you."

"I'm not here to harass him. I just want to see some pussy. Is that so wrong, brother?"

"I ain't your brother."

"Just let me in Charlie."

The gargantuan neo-nazi bouncer stepped away from the doorway and allowed Royce into his paradise. Royce opened his walking stance and pulled his package up so that it was tight against his jeans. He then altered his walk to a "cool walk", which only the "cool guys" preparing themselves for stardom, could do. A "cool walk", according to Royce, consisted of bouncing yourself on the heels of your cowboy boots. He smiled at strippers who had danced for him onetime, but never again for some reason. A black waitress offered him a dirty look. So did a rather young dancer on one of the stages. She was new, Royce deduced. He could possibly take advantage of her.

Royce made his way to the bar and let the environment become him. He let his reflection in the many mirrors become his friend. He let the flickering, black lights,

become his personality. He let the half- naked women dressed in see-through rubber tops and shaggy bikini wear be his fantasy. He felt he could do no better than to be a part of this company. It was three in the afternoon, on a Sunday, and there were few customers gawking at the exotic dancers. Royce didn't mind. He liked visiting during this slow time for that very reason, that he might be the center of attention. The rude, waddling owner often stole his spotlight.

"Jerry, what's going on brother?"

"Fuck off, Royce. I don't need to see you today. It's been a good day so far."

"Come on, Jerry. Is that how you treat a friend from the old country?"

"First of all, Royce, this ain't an old country. Serbia, where my parents are from, and supposedly, where your parents are from, is an old country but you weren't born there, you idiot, so you can't say things like that."

"Jerry, is this about the hundred bucks I owe you. Jerry, I got my pay cheque right here, brother. I'll pay you back." Royce knew that he owed more money but he didn't want to embarrass himself in front of the two strippers on either side of Jerry. Jerry owned *Daredevils*, and although he was the ugliest, baldest, fattest, most despicable person Royce had ever known to share a similar heritage with, he was getting laid and that meant the world to Royce. Women, above all else, obsessed Royce to the point of insanity. He knew Jerry knew this. Royce also recognized the unpaid favors Jerry had provided him early on in their relationship. What Royce once considered a friendship based on the promise that Royce would put the name of the Stripjoint on his barrel when he decided to go over The Falls, had obviously soured because of money.

"You owe me more, you little shit. What about the sponsorship money? You haven't even gone over, yet. Don't be ripping me off, or else I'm going to send you over without the fucking barrel."

"I know, Jerry. I'll get you the rest next week. Listen, is Sheila around?"

"Sheila is in Hamilton, where she lives. She's not coming in till later, but she wanted you to know that she doesn't want to fuck you. Can I say it more plainly?"

"Come on, Jerry. Even you know she wants it."

"She dances for me, Royce. That's all I know, and she said she won't dance here if you're here. So what I'm thinking is this. Stay away from her. Some of the high



rollers like her. She's a favorite, so keep your little hands off. She's not yours. I own her."

Jerry seemed to take pleasure in the wielding of this power over Royce. He made Royce feel envious of the fact that he had free pussy available to him whenever he wanted, as if he knew how such an existence was Royce's Utopia. Jerry took out a pipe and the blond stripper to his left struck a match and buried it in the pipe hole. He puffed out foul smelling smoke into Royce's face.

"I guess I'll leave the cheque with you then? I gotta go."

Royce tried to make the exchange at least sound professional in front of the attentive, accompanying strippers.

"Don't come back, you hear!"

"Very funny, Jerry."

Royce left with a frozen smile on his face. Once he entered the safety of his vehicle that smile quickly dissipated and was replaced by a series of curses. Royce cursed and cursed and beat the center of his steering wheel, which had grown stale and hard, and without a horn. He had no more money and he couldn't very well steal any more from his grandparents, whom he lived with. He decided to drive by The Clift to see what was happening there.

Royce walked into The Clift, in his usual manner, toes pointed outward so that he could expose his genital section to the world. He noticed Dawn behind the bar and was aroused by the tight white shirt she was wearing. A studious Gabriel with glasses sat at a table in the corner, in behind stacks of bills and papers. Nearby sat the old man who practically lived at The Clift. Before him was a coffee stained cup and an ashtray full of cigarette butts spilling onto his top hat. Sitting at the bar with as much to do as him, was Michael, having some kind of red drink.

"Where are the broads, brother?" Royce tried his best to imitate a Brooklyn accent, and thought he had pulled it off. He politely ordered a beer. Dawn reluctantly served him without a smile.

Royce lowered his pretended excitement level once he realized that it stood out amidst the prevalent mood in the bar, which was depressing. He quickly assimilated.

“You know, brother, I hate Sundays. I don’t know one guy who’s picked up a broad on a Sunday, you know, not one guy.”

“Not even you, Royce.”

“I didn’t say me.”

Royce pulled back to lift his collar.

“You know brother, I was drilling this broad the other day, and she said to me, ‘Royce, why don’t you look at me anymore.’”

Royce imitated her loudly in an annoying voice. He prepared himself to reenact the staged event by getting off of the stool. He couldn’t control himself when he was lying.

“Maybe I don’t wanna look at you, I told her, and besides, how am I supposed to look at you when I’m drilling you from behind, eh, eh.”

He slapped Michael a number of times on the shoulder to see if Michael was believing his bullshit. That stupid idiot Michael nodded, so Royce went on.

“And so I told her, how about we make a deal baby, I don’t look at you, you don’t look at me, I drill you whenever I want, whenever I please, and you like it. And you know what, brother, the girl can’t get enough of me. The worse I treat her, the more she wants it. She’s calling me on my cell. She calls me at my ex-girlfriend’s, that sick dog, leaving messages like she “wants to do it in the barrel”. She’s begging for it. But shit, I don’t mind, I get to drill her whenever I want, no questions asked, slam bam thank you mam.”

He slapped his little hands loudly to emphasize the words.

“Then why aren’t you with her now?”

Royce noticed that Michael was unusually sad today.

“What do you mean?” Royce tried to buy time for his little mind to work.

“Why aren’t you drilling her now, stud?”

Michael smirked and motioned to go into the kitchen.

For once, Royce couldn’t find an excuse and he worried whether it showed on his face. He waited for Michael to return through the swinging doors before he paid for the beer. In the meantime he looked to Dawn to start a conversation, but Dawn avoided direct eye contact with him. Michael soon entered the bar area again. He paced behind

the bar to act like the owner who was checking up on things. Royce tried a different angle.

“Brother, you don’t know my problems.”

“What problems are those, Royce?”

“Listen. I don’t got much money on me, slide me a tab for tonight? I get paid Thursday, and I’ll give you the money then. I’m good for it.”

Michael grabbed a book in behind the bar and made it look like he was studying something of importance when Royce asked him this question. Michael flipped through the pages, stalling a decision, until he came across a page, which he showed to Royce. He hinted for Royce to read it aloud.

### ***BAR BIBLE POINTERS #1:***

*When approached with a request for a tab, refuse it immediately. Tabs are contagious, and once provided, are rarely paid in full. More often than not, when they ARE paid, the same request resurfaces.*

While Royce was reading he noticed Dawn the bartender attempting to advise Michael not to do it with a stretched back face and a subtle nod. But Royce was a pretty good customer, by The Clift’s standards, and he did spend a lot of money at the bar on a regular basis. Michael yelled to his brother, who continued to punch numbers into a calculator, in the far corner. Gabriel saw no problem with it. Royce was granted a twenty-dollar tab that night.

Having received the security to drink more with this credit, Royce indulged in this strangely honest spiel, sensing he would be there a while. He then admitted to a number of things Michael could have probably guessed about him on his own.

“Why won’t girls just spread ‘em, you know? Why does it have to be so hard to get them on your dick?”

“What do you mean, Royce? You don’t have any problems with the girls. You’re a lady’s man. You’re a daredevil.”

“Do you see a lady beside me, brother.” Royce interrupted in a self-deprecating manner.

“Where’s your ex?”

“My ex is busting my balls. that’s where she is. She spied on me the other night. She saw me trying to pick up that brunette who was sitting at the end of the bar. remember her, the older cougar with the tight skirt, and all the gold on her fingers. My ex went to tell my mother, and then she went to a lawyer. She said she’s going to sue me man, for support. She said, if I don’t stay with her, to take care of my son, she’d get all my money some how. I just wanna good looking broad. I want a trophy. I want to walk into a bar and I want everyone to know that I’m drilling her in my barrel. Is that too much to ask? But I got no coin, and I just got this job at the factory”.

“Do they pay you good at the factory?”

“Yeah, as good as most people there.”

“Then where does all your money go?”

“On the whores, brother.”

Royce explained himself in a soft, earnest tone, and he hoped Michael would buy into it. Michael had this look on his face like he couldn’t believe he was having this conversation with Royce. Dawn, who huffed and puffed at every admission of guilt confessed by Royce, had the same look on her face. She scurried about in behind the bar cleaning the already clean bottles and liquor shelves with a damp rag.

“I can’t help it.”

Royce placed his tiny hands over his little face.

“Can’t help what?”

“Spending it on them. I go to the rip joint and I’m buying some stripper drinks all night. She tells me how much she wants me to drill her, and then she takes off with some other guy. And then, by the end of the night, I only got fifty bucks in my pocket. So what do I do, I pick up a whore on the street and take her around the corner man.”

Royce confessed everything freely. He tried to laugh with his mouth to cover up the fact that his eyes might have been watery, but he didn’t care. He didn’t care any more what Michael thought, as long as Michael pitied him.

“Listen Royce, you’re a pretty good looking guy. You don’t need to spend money on girls all the time, especially at the rip joints. They’ll take you for all you got there. You’ve got to come out to places like this, with only forty bucks, and spend it on yourself. If you want to buy one round for a couple of girls, just to break the ice, then do

it. But just one round, or else anyone in their right mind is going to take advantage of a guy who wants to buy them drinks the whole night, especially one that continues to offer. They see right away that you wanna drill them, so they don't feel guilty about it. You see what I mean?"

Royce listened attentively.

"You've got to be more cool about it, and less obvious that you wanna drill them. Hell, once a girl sits down, you're already telling her your last sexual experience. I think that's a little too obvious Royce, don't you think?"

"You're right, brother, you're so right. Why are you helping me like this, brother? No one's ever helped me like this."

Royce managed to scramble his voice and appear all teary eyed. He then reached over the space between the stools with his little arms and embraced Michael. Royce noticed Gabriel in the reflection of the mirror, disapproving with a nod.

"Just promise me something, Royce. Can you do that? When a girl comes in here, don't buy her a drink, especially if you don't know her. Give her a line first and then see if it's worth it, okay?"

Michael pushed him away politely.

"I promise you, brother. No more drinks for the broads."

Royce contested rather strongly, and as is often the case when one is trying to defeat an addiction, two available women happened to enter the bar to test him.

Royce recognized one of the ladies to be one of The Clift's most popular female regulars. She walked in with a younger but more exotic looking friend who was easily under the age limit to drink. Sara was a thirty three year old regular, a two-time divorcee, who frequented The Clift. She was a tease, or so Royce thought, but one he would love to bed. She had reddish brown hair, blue eyes, and a skinny body. She worked down the street as a waitress, at one of the new restaurants that recently opened by the Minolta Tower, which also overlooked The Falls. Very much Italian, she had a good sense of bar humor that did well with the guys at the bar, although she unnerved Michael often. Michael had once told Royce in secret that she was two faced and conniving. She was always gloating about how good a waitress she was in order to get hired at The Clift.

She entered with a younger, African American friend, and sat at the bar. Her friend had her hair in those crazy island beads. Sara called Michael over with her usual salutation.

“Hey baby, how’s it going? Just came from work, down the street. It was so busy down there. I pulled in about a thousand just myself.”

Michael seemed already annoyed by this news.

“Where’s Tootz?” She put her purse on the bar and proceeded to take out her wallet. Royce expertly deduced why Sara had asked for Tootz before greeting him at the bar. She worked with Tootz, as a waitress, at a restaurant down the street. Royce continued to stare at her, drool escaping his mouth accidentally. He wiped it away. He was desperate for her to offer him the same salutation. He was desperate for her to give him a charm an opening.

“Hey baby, what’s going on?” She finally asked Royce with a flirtatious smile.

He didn’t hear the words without interpretation. It was like his penis was translating the words into an encoded language only his body could understand. Her attention quickly transferred from him to Michael.

“Listen baby, I need a beer with a tall glass, and a Pink Paradise for my friend Jean here.” Sara asked Michael instead of Dawn. Dawn never liked Sara but Sara didn’t seem to mind. Flipping through his Bar Bible, Michael scanned the description of the drink and mumbled the drink description aloud in order to remember it, like he would a phone number.

***PINK PARADISE***

*1.5oz. Coconut Rum*

*1oz. Amaretto*

*3oz. Cranberry Juice*

*1.5oz. Pineapple Juice*

***Directions:*** *Combine ingredients over ice in hurricane or parfait glass.  
Garnish with a pineapple wedge and a cherry.*

But before Michael started making the drinks, Royce intruded with an offer.

“I got those drinks, brother, put it on my tab.”

“Royce!” Michael yelled at him but Royce failed to realize what he had done. He was almost raping Sara with his eyes. And of course, she recognized this instantly. She wanted it, he knew that. She was giving him eyes.

Tootz rolled out of the kitchen to greet Sara with a kiss. He then sat next to her at the bar, in between her and Royce, obstructing Royce's view. Tootz ordered a drink as well, on Royce's tab.

“It's Sunday Michael, niggers aren't supposed to work on Sunday.”

Tootz joked, but Michael didn't seem to like the fact that he was paying his cook to drink. Gabriel soon joined the group as did the old man from the table, Scorpio. With the same fake smile, Sara greeted him with the same remark.

“Hey Baby, what's going on?”

Scorpio smiled and blushed. Poor guy, Royce thought, she was being polite to him. Scorpio had no chance. Royce was first in line this time, he was sure of it. He continued to buy her and the few people at the bar drinks, thinking this would impress her, or her friend. He would take either one of them, he deemed to himself, or even both.

Sara stayed for some time. Royce didn't appreciate how she spread her attention around to everyone, but he didn't mind. As long as she was going home with him, it didn't matter. Moments later, she left all of a sudden. She blew a kiss to the entire group, even the old guy. She would give Royce no pleasure but the wiggle of her little ass. He would etch it in his memory and perhaps use it when he was all alone in a bathroom.

Royce collected himself quickly and made an excuse like he had to go as well. He knew he had exceeded his tab that very night so he wanted to rush out before Michael reminded him of the final damage. When he reached the safety of his car, he expected someone to run out and chase him for the money he owed, but nothing happened. He smiled in the rear view mirror when he realized where he could drink until his next pay cheque.

## **Karaoke Night**

An old man from the Old Folks Home decided one day that he would go for a few drinks, and then kill himself. His name was Sal Hennepin. He was without family but the pretended sincerity of the nurses at the Old Folks Home. He was tired of using his legs for walking so he sat in a wheelchair and used his feet to give him momentum. The soles of his prosthetic shoes were nearly worn out. He wore the same clothes for days. At one time, he was an important man, a professor of Cultural Studies at the nearby University in the Peninsula. He had specialized in the suburban transition between rural and urban communities. Now, he had considered himself an abandoned, fraudulent, recluse. He had written many books and articles, led conferences, and given countless lectures. He had retired one day after realizing that his words held little worth in the young perceptions of his students. The candle of his creativity and the effort required to keep up the fear of not being embarrassed had taken its toll on him. So "Salamander", as his students and colleagues were apt to call him, took a vow of silence after his son died.

He managed to hear about The Clift from a crazy lunatic whose bedroom he shared on occasion at the Old Folks Home. The crazy man with the bottle-like glasses claimed to own a share in the rather new establishment across the street. He said that they needed him there. He claimed that no one could stop him from going, not even the doctors. His name was once Zachary and now it was Scorpio, at his request. He was the best roommate. He was never around, although his smoke scented clothing contributed to the pungent, diseased odor of the room, like a haunting demon.

Sal left his rust colored cardigan on the velour chair and rolled himself to the green bathroom with the yellow tub. He greased the few strands of hair that did little to hide the liver spots. He grabbed his chin and yanked it down. It was soft and flexible. He turned his profile and noticed in the mirror how ugly the hearing aid made him look on that side. He wanted to remove it but it controlled one of the few senses he still depended on. He buttoned his plaid shirt, and washed his face. Feeling clean, he escaped the Old Folks Home at a snail's pace. He managed to cross the rubble road while the gentle slope to The Clift made it easier for him to reach the door. At the door, he waited for someone to take pity on him and push him inside. He knew he would have problems



with the stone step. A young man from inside noticed him and rushed out. He politely pushed him inside.

“How are you, sir? I’ll help you inside.”

The younger man had olive skin and dark brown hair. He was wearing a black leather jacket, a black shirt, and black pants. He wore a trimmed goatee mustache on his baby face, but his eyes were sincere. Sal once had a stubborn son with the same eyes, and the same frowning eyebrows.

He pushed Sal into the bar area at a good pace, and Sal wondered whether the young man had any previous experience with a wheelchair. He seemed to know the right speed to transport someone, unlike the nurses, who were always in a rush.

“What can I get you, sir?” The young man strolled around the bar rubbing his hands.

Sal mouthed the words but he didn’t speak. The young man soon understood.

“A beer, fine. What kind?”

Sal shrugged his shoulders with an embarrassed smile, meaning just about anything.

The young man pulled a cold beer from a rattling freezer, turned the cap off and walked around the bar to hand Sal the beer.

“If you need anything, sir, just wave. My name is Michael.”

Sal nodded with a relieved smile. Michael returned him an understanding smile.

After a few minutes of staring into space, Sal heard someone enter from the back. A black man with a bini stuck his head through the swinging doors. His white teeth matched his white eyeballs. Sal nodded hello. The black man winked. Almost simultaneously, another young man entered from the front. He looked like Michael, but was taller. His nails were outlined with black grease, like a mechanic’s, who had worked for hours trying to wash it off. He immediately noticed Sal sitting in his wheelchair, and introduced himself with a handshake.

“Hi, I’m Gabriel. I’m part owner of The Clift. Has someone taken care of you?”

Sal nodded and smiled.

“Good, glad to hear that. Michael, Michael?”

Michael rose from his slouched down position behind the bar. He was stocking the fridges with beer, supposedly.

"Teddy's going to come in early to set up for Karaoke night."

"I can't believe we're going to have Karaoke in the bar. I hate Karaoke."

"Why, it's not that bad. Karaoke is fun." Gabriel looked over to Sal to gain some approval of the idea but Sal just smiled neutrally.

"I don't know, Gabriel. The idea of people, mostly amateurs, coming up to a mike to completely murder a song that is completely out of their range, is not funny to me. To have a guy, who looks more like George Thorougood, go up and sing a song by Whitney Houston does not amuse me in the least. It only makes me wonder as to the mental state of that person."

"Oh, Michael. You don't know how to have fun. You watch. The people will love it, eh mister. Everyone loves Karaoke."

Sal raised his beer to show Gabriel he was listening and was not deaf, despite the hearing aid.

Gabriel patted Sal on the back before he pushed through the kitchen doors.

Michael, in the meantime, took a book from underneath the bar and flipped through the pages. He started to read aloud. Gabriel and the black man exited the kitchen upon hearing his voice.

"Karaoke is a Japanese abbreviated compound word: "Kara" comes from "karappo" meaning empty, and "oke" is the abbreviation of "okesutura", or orchestra. Music tapes in which only the accompaniment is recorded were named "karaoke", according to this section of the Bar Bible subtitled, party favorites."

"Legend has it that karaoke started at a snack bar in Kobe City. It was said that when a strolling guitarist called in sick, the owner of the bar prepared a few tapes with musical accompaniment, and local vocalists enjoyed singing to the tapes."

"I'm telling you, Michael, it's going to work here. All of the other bars in the area dedicate a night to it and there is a large chunk of tourist action from Asia. It's no wonder why it's everywhere."

Michael had this look on his face, according to Sal, like he was still not convinced.

“What’s the guy’s name again?”

“His name is Teddy, and he’s supposed to be very good.”

“Teddy? When I think of a Karaoke guy named Teddy, I picture a man, around sixty or seventy years old with his little Karaoke box and a million annoying anecdotes, thinking he is Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jr. and Dean Martin all rolled into one.”

“What are you talking about? This guy is young. Michael, you think too much.”

Gabriel left to walk to the back area once again while Michael smiled innocently at Sal.

Teddy arrived early to set up his equipment.

After having parked his large brown van with the globe like circular windows, so that the back doors faced the front door of the bar, Teddy jumped out of his seat and came inside to surmise where he could set up his equipment. Teddy was about 35 years old, Michael’s height, with long white blond hair, leather tanned skin, two large loop earrings in each ear, a ragged tank top exposing his hairy chest, up your ass jean shorts, and no socks with white running shoes.

“Hey Gabe.” He greeted Michael with his brother’s name in an overly friendly manner.

“Are you Teddy?” Michael asked him to make sure. Michael had a shocked look in his eyes like he hoped this was not the guy they had hired.

Teddy leaned against the bar and offered Sal a pitying smile. Sal didn’t appreciate it. He offered Michael a different smile, an entertainer’s smile. That smile showed more teeth and it was complimented by a twitching wink.

“How’s business, Gabe?” He repeated this mistake every time he spoke to Michael. It only seemed to bother the young man more.

“Business is picking up, but we’ve got to get this Thursday night going. It’s kind of slow.” When Michael spoke to him, he didn’t bother looking at him. He made it seem as if he was busy preparing something.

“You can’t expect miracles tonight though Gabe, it takes a few weeks before people catch the groove.” Teddy slurred the word ‘groove’, like Sal would have done in the sixties, when he was about his age, and higher than a kite.

Finally noticing that Michael was busy, and wasn't prepared to indulge him in small talk. Teddy left to unload his speakers and his little karaoke machine from the van. When he left, Michael rolled his eyes so that Sal could see. Sal couldn't help to giggle silently. He then held up the empty beer bottle and Michael quickly replaced the beer with a full one. Sal held up his money and Michael brought him back change right away. Sal refused what would have been a generous amount for a tip.

"No. I can't take all of this."

Sal refused again, and communicated an insulted, frowning look. Michael understood.

"Thank you, sir. I really appreciate that."

Sal smiled again.

After setting everything up, Teddy turned on everything to do a sound check. Teddy plugged in his musical accompaniment and for a while tested his timing with a patting foot. He proceeded in spurts to sing "Lady in Red" to an empty bar, which was not completely empty, because Michael and Sal were there. The private serenade made Michael feel uncomfortable, or so thought Sal. Teddy chose to sing the entire song. And worst of all, according to Sal, and for some unexplainable reason, he sang "Lady in Red" like a country singer would. He slurred the last word to achieve this effect. Instead of singing "Lady in Red", he would pronounce it as "Lady in Rayd". Sal wondered whether he sang most of his songs this way.

Towards the end of the song, Michael couldn't take it any more to watch the bar. Uncomfortable, he went into the kitchen to pull out his brother and the cook. The three of them were laughing and Sal envied their youth. He envied their joking mannerisms. He listened to them intently.

"Hey Michael, lucky you aren't wearing any rayd tonight, eh buddy." The cook sunk within himself to giggle.

"Where do you find these guys, Michael?"

"I don't know, ask my brother, he's the one who hired him. The guy can't tell us apart. He calls me Gabe."

"That's all right Michael, he likes your brother then."

"Fuck you, Tootz. He's just practicing."

“He’s singing Lady in Rayd to which girl then out there?”

Almost immediately after the song, Teddy trotted to Michael in a more strained, feminine voice.

“Hey Gabe, is it all right if I point the speakers toward the bar. Most of the people stand at the bar and you got me cornered out there by the dance floor.”

“Whatever Teddy. Do what you want to, but we have some things to prep in the kitchen.”

“Gotcha! Later, Gabe!”

Teddy gave one of his entertainer’s shotgun good byes. He then chugged out in his beated down van.

Teddy returned later that night, at the stroke of Sal’s fifth beer. And unfortunately for the two young men who showed faith in him, the only crowd his name would attract was his two parents and his girlfriend.

When he started, around 10p.m., the audience in the bar consisted of Michael, Gabriel, a lovely bartender named Dawn, Tootz the cook, Teddy’s parents, and his girlfriend.

After a few songs performed by Teddy, Gabriel tried to convince everybody that Teddy was a good singer.

“What’s wrong with him?” Gabriel asked sincerely to a number of disapproving grins, led not so surprisingly by Michael’s. Everything Teddy did bothered Michael. Throughout the evening, Michael would take a seat next to Sal and secretly explain his disapproval of the singer. He even complained about the way Teddy chose to organize his sets.

According to Michael, Teddy opened up singing a country song, swung back in time to sing a Frankie Avalon song, and then he jumped three decades ahead to completely strangle a song by a strange group called R.E.M. Sal knew that Teddy was attempting to please everybody in the bar. The only problem was that nobody was in the bar to please. Gabriel, in a stubborn diplomatic fashion, tried to smooth Teddy over to everybody.

“You know, I heard this guy packs some other bars down the street.”

In the meantime, Teddy frequently picked up the mike and strolled around the tables and the bar, serenading people. He tried to incite them to come up and sing for themselves. Gabriel thought this a good thing of course, especially when Teddy mentioned the names of the employees who worked there in between his sets.

Dawn, the bartender, often made fun of Teddy's little sayings, which would follow an annoying little giggle before the song ended. She wrote them down and they laughed about them when Teddy took five, sayings like, "There's Dawn at the bar, doing her *thang*", or "Go and see Gabe and Mike, doing the owner *thang*", or "where's Tootz, cooking hot *thangs* in the kitchen".

As the night dragged on, a few other people strolled in to view the unusual live performance. Michael had explained to Sal in private that they came only because Gabriel had teased their curiosity nights before with propaganda like, "You guy's gotta come in and see this guy we got for Karaoke Thursday, he's the best."

This little man with cowboy boots and a horrible Brooklyn accent walked in with a cellular phone in his hand. He walked by Sal in a business manner not entirely suited to him, loudly arranging some plunge over The Falls in a barrel. He introduced himself to Sal as Royce, the first ever "Serbian" to go over The Falls in a barrel, but not yet. Mr. Simms, Sal's roommate had also stopped by. He was surprised to see Sal there. He invited Sal to join him at his table, but Sal refused. Sal was comfortable near the bar, in the center of the action. A rather overly done up woman, who introduced herself to Sal as Sara, with a flirtatious wink, and her friend Mark, also had a seat at the bar for the show. Sara introduced Michael and Gabriel and Sal to another man in her life, her ten-year-old son Frankie. Frankie, whose hair was short and dark brown, accompanied his mom with the excuse that he had no school the next day. Already past eleven when they came in, Michael seemed to silently disapprove, although everybody took quickly to the little kid. He was a wise guy, well beyond his age, and quite the pool shark, according to his own opinion. He had his own cue that he lugged around with him the whole night.

He called Michel "uncle Michael" and Gabriel, "papa", and neither of them seemed to like that, thought Sal, but they brushed it off with a smile.

When the music started up again, Sara dragged her escort Mark to a table right in front of Teddy, and next to his girlfriend, who sat with Teddy's parents. Teddy's girlfriend was red haired and freckled, and she seemed comfortable listening to Teddy.

Like the daredevil he claimed to be, Royce quickly went to sit at the table with Sara and Mark, snuggling up to Sara's side. Sal had to admit; the little guy had balls to flirt with the woman in the company of her apparent boyfriend. Meanwhile, little Frankie and Michael played pool in the opposite corner.

Michael seemed to like the kid. Before they played pool, Michael advised Dawn the bartender to take care of Sal. Sal silently appreciated the concern. He felt welcomed at this bar. His roommate, Scorpio, had not lied when he said that the people at the bar liked him. Everyone was so friendly and approachable.

Royce was the first amateur to sing a song at the Clift. Thank God it only lasted three minutes. Sal sighed, as Royce horribly rendered a song entitled, "You were born to be my baby," or so Sal thought, in the direction of Sara and her disapproving companion, Mark. The little horny dog couldn't even keep the mike in front of his mouth as he attempted to sing with emotion in front of Sara. The rest of the patrons had their hands over their ears, and at that point Sal understood Michael's previous rationale.

Scorpio sat at his table like he hadn't even heard a song yet. That poor man had severe problems, Sal had always believed. He seemed asleep or agitated, one of the two. He didn't even flinch at the annoying cacophony of Royce trying to get laid.

As soon as the song ended, Sara went up to sing. When she did, Teddy lowered the lights so that he could flip the switch to start the Crystal ball. Sara sounded even worse than Royce. She tried to vocalize, "Just Call me Angel in the Morning". Yeah, maybe angel of death. Sal thought to himself. In the meantime, her little son, Frankie, cleared the pool table like a professional, calling every shot.

Sara's song drew applause from everyone including Scorpio, while Royce jumped to his feet to give her a standing ovation.

Just then another customer pranced through the front door, a rather bulky Italian looking man, with his shirt buttoned down low to expose his hairy chest. He wore tight jeans to expose his plump behind, and snake skinned cowboy boots. Teddy immediately recognized the landed immigrant and called him over to the mike.

“Davey’s here to do his *thang* everybody.”

Without hesitation, and without ever buying a drink, this other Karaoke guy from down the street supposedly, or so Sal overheard in behind him, went up to the mike and took center stage singing “Diana”, by Paul Anka, a song Sal recognized. Teddy danced and snapped his fingers in behind, mouthing the words to himself. Sal glanced over to Michael by the pool table to see him looking over to his brother and shaking his head. Gabriel seemed to be laughing at his brother’s disapproving reaction to the whole scene.

To add to the performance of “Diana”, Teddy grabbed Sara onto the dance floor, to dance cheek to cheek with him. Whether or not he did this to entertain the small crowd, Sal didn’t know, but for some reason he chose Sara above his own girlfriend. This unusual but deliberate action definitely caused a mess.

Within seconds Teddy’s red haired girlfriend stormed out of the bar, right by Michael and little Frankie. Michael and Frankie postponed their pool game to go to the window to watch the soap opera unravel through the blinds. Even Tootz came out from the kitchen to join Michael, Gabriel and little Frankie at the window, staring at Teddy’s girlfriend kicking his beat up van. Sal could see everything through the front entrance window. Teddy rushed out next and Davey took over the show, in the process grabbing an abandoned Sara who was left alone on the dance floor and without a partner. Davey continued to sing. He held Sara in his arms in the tackiest of serenades Sal had ever been witness to. Royce watched as if foiled.

Teddy seemed to be trying to explain something to his girlfriend while she pushed him a number of times. She then threw a key at him, which must have been to the van, because Sal assumed Teddy lived out of his van. Teddy then tried to grab her in an attempt to control her but she slapped his face. Finally, he managed to control her, although she was still apparently angry with him. She bolted into the bar on her own with evident purpose. Quickly, everybody resumed their former positions, acting like they had never spied on everything, little Frankie being the first one to expertly cover up as Teddy’s girlfriend reached the door.

“Okay, five ball, side pocket,” he called his shot with a little smirk on his face when she walked in behind him. Sal admired the kid’s poise.



By this time Sara had left the dance floor to sit at her table with Mark and Royce. Mark had also appeared upset, but the stupid sap didn't have the balls to say something. To make matters worse, Royce frolicked around, trying to get Sara to somehow kiss him. Davey knelt nearby on the dance floor, on one knee, thinking himself Elvis with his one arm extended high, emulating the King.

Teddy quickly reentered again. Michael rushed by Sal's wheelchair, talking to himself in obvious disgust.

"I can't believe we're paying this guy \$75 dollars to scrap with his girlfriend on our property, so that all of our customers can see and wonder the same thing."

But Teddy had greater concerns at hand. His girlfriend had her finger pointed in Sara's face, yelling even above Davey's Elvis impersonation. Noticing how this strange lady yelled at his mother, but not realizing his mother's part in the fiasco, little Frankie took hold of his pool stick and went over to the table to threaten Teddy's girlfriend with it.

Quickly, Gabriel rushed over there to swing little Frankie over his head. Not helping the situation, Sara asked little Frankie to play pool with his 'uncle', who was supposedly Michael. The show had to go on.

Mark took off in his Jag, surprising everyone else, and especially Tootz, who had taken a seat near Sal and openly expressed how he had thought Mark was spineless. Davey continued to sing, although Michael was paying Teddy to. Teddy's parents now involved themselves, while Royce assumed the unlikely role of peacemaker. In what would turn out to be the most bizarre of scenes, Royce dismissed Teddy and his parents from the situation and grabbed Teddy's girlfriend a drink in order to convince her to have a seat with Sara where they could presumably hammer out whatever misunderstandings still existed. Sal listened to the entire persuasion.

"Listen, believe me, Sara's in love with me, not Teddy. She wouldn't do him, not that there's anything wrong with him. And besides, what are you doing with a guy like that. He's going nowhere. Did I tell you I'm a daredevil?"

Sal had to admit, Royce did succeed in this endeavor as peacemaker, although he also succeeded in falling from his recognized position as 'bar jester' to 'bar sucker', or so Tootz felt the need to explain to Sal. After having reconciled the two, the ever-horny

daredevil chose to explain how he did so to Teddy's parents, who were concerned throughout the night as to what was going on.

While Royce took the time to explain to them the misunderstanding, and how he managed to alleviate it, in behind him, Davey resumed his serenading of Sara. Teddy danced with his girlfriend in a sort of 'let's makeup' dance.

Everybody watched in slow motion. Davey extended his hand to Sara to join him on the dance floor as he sang 'Unchained Melody' for her and the other reconciling company. Everybody watched, while Royce didn't even notice, how someone was now cutting the grass he had already been cutting on someone else.

Within minutes, Sara was stuck to this guy at the lips. Michael tried to hide her son from seeing by blocking his angle of vision. Little Frankie saw. He tried to cover it up by trying to keep his attention on the pool table, but he was missing a whole lot of shots now, easy ones that he could sink with his eyes closed.

To add to the mix, Tootz left Sal's company to approach Michael rather disturbed, too disturbed, stressing that Michael should kick Sara out. Michael and Tootz got in a pretty heated argument that night because Michael wasn't taking him seriously. Michael seemed to test Tootz on how far he would go to force him to kick out Sara. Michael was not saying a word. He was just standing with his arms crossed, listening to Tootz berating him from the side.

But Michael surely didn't appreciate Tootz trying to tell him how to run his own bar, especially when Tootz went on about Teddy.

"If you pay that guy tonight, I will not work for you again. I come in here, I work my ass off, and only come away with sixty bucks and you're going to pay this guy a hundred for this mess." Tootz argued rather angrily. He had downed a few too many drinks after his shift, but that didn't excuse him from embarrassing Michael in front of a number of other customers. Michael also didn't like his tone of voice, or his ultimatum, so Michael exploded back at him until he retreated.

"Listen, if you want to fucking quit, quit! And if I want to pay this guy one hundred dollars or even one thousand dollars, that's my decision, because it's my place. You don't pay the bills. You don't even see the bills. You're the fucking cook. You're

not a partner, so leave. Go ahead. Go work somewhere else if you fucking want. See if I give a shit!"

Michael screamed enough so that Dawn could hear him and he could kill two birds with one stone, and possibly prevent a future confrontation with her. Sal was surprised to hear Michael explode like that. He appeared too reserved to be confrontational. Sal remembered the time when he was surprised to hear his son stand up to him. His son was intent on quitting school and becoming an actor, but Sal would hear nothing of it. Sal tried his best to forget and took another sip of beer.

During Michael's argument with Tootz, Royce had turned around to see Sara's face stuck to Davey's. Sal supposed that Royce turned to the dance floor as everyone had done once they heard the smooching over the microphone. The microphone was draped over Sara's shoulder as she and Davey embraced to dance. Little Frankie cringed when he saw his mother tonguing this strange man, while many of the patrons joined him in this reaction.

After that last song, Sara approached the group by the bar, asking for a volunteer to take her son home. Gabriel offered only for little Frankie's sake. Sara then left with Davey, and Royce approached Michael next, with a pale face, like he had just seen a ghost.

He grabbed Michael's arm and pulled him aside. Sal edged a little closer to hear. "Can I have a drink, on my tab?"

He tried to ask Michael in the lowest voice possible for a human. Michael stupidly chose to buy him one instead, because he felt sorry for him. Sal couldn't believe that Michael would feel sorry for such a despicable creature. His generosity incited Royce to open up to him like Michael was his best friend.

"She left with another guy, brother."

Royce talked as if he saw the coming of the end of the world. Losing Sara to Davey definitely rattled him.

Michael had nothing to say to him. Any excuse he could have made for her would have sounded obviously fake and deliberate. Sal continued to listen to Royce's complaints.

"I sang for her. I bought her drinks the whole night. I smoothed things over with the singer's broad, and now she's gone...gone to drill another guy." Royce grieved, and covered his eyes with his little hand.

"Just go home, Royce, and forget this night ever happened." Michael advised him wisely.

"What's wrong with me, brother?"

"You'll bounce back, Royce, don't worry. She's just another broad. But I told you before and you didn't want to listen to me. You never buy a girl drinks the whole night. I told you, they'll always fuck you in the end."

"You're right, brother. You're right. Why don't I listen to my friends, brother? And you're my best friend. You know that? No one treats me as good as you do."

Although the present circumstances made this remark seem rather funny to Sal at the time, it did make Michael pity him even more. Michael offered to drive him home but Royce said he had another stop to make.

Thinking that the night had finally ended in every way, Sal was surprised to hear Teddy selecting one more song to sing. Everyone turned to hear him dedicate this song to the one who requested it.

"This here song is going out to a good friend of mine at The Clift. This here's for you buddy, to a spy called Scorpio."

Teddy emphasized his name as energetically as he began the night. The song was a country song, and to the increased amusement of all of the patrons at the bar, Scorpio got up and danced a little jig. Teddy spurned him on, and poked fun at him with remarks like,

"You go, you spy you", or "Look at Scorpio, doing the spy *thang*...."

Sal held up a bill for Dawn to take. After leaving her the change, he slowly peddled his wheelchair towards the door. Before he reached the door, Michael caught up to him to offer help and an explanation.

"I'm sorry, sir. It's not usually like this. It's the karaoke."

Sal smiled and lifted his hand. Michael flinched back at first but then let Sal feel the soft skin of his face. Sal remembered a time when his son was the age of little Frankie and then the age of Michael. He remembered the day his son left to pursue his dream to

become an actor, despite his father's demands that he develop his intellect. Sal had always wanted his son to pursue his education and to earn his money with his mind. His son had run away and Sal refused to talk to him anymore. Sal also remembered the day he heard news of his son's death, and how alone he had felt. He had resigned himself to a fiercer silence the next day, to spite God. If he would have kept his mouth shut the first time his son introduced the idea of becoming an actor, his son might have been alive today. If he had shut up, his son would be Michael right now.

Sal refused Michael's offer of pushing him across the street. Instead, he waved to Scorpio who did not see him. After receiving help over the first step and onto the stone walkway, Sal headed towards the call of The Falls. He made his way down the steep slope of the escarpment and wondered whether Michael and Gabriel would hire Teddy for next Thursday. Such an irrelevant detail bothered him but not enough to stall his decision.

The familiar roar of The Falls, like the sound of the ocean in a conch shell, was too hypnotic for him to rest. Sal rolled down the escarpment letting his unfeeling old hands slow the rubber wheels down. He felt a wet breeze slide under his coat sleeve. A shiver then traveled through him like a bolt of electricity.

A car horn sounded and red brake lights rushed by before Sal realized that he had ventured near the dashed lines on the road. He continued to roll slowly in the same direction, down the deceptive slope encased by the jagged rock-cliff of the escarpment. He rolled towards the lights that decorated this wonder of the world with the candescence of Heaven, or a clouded dreamscape. He followed the dimmer lights of Queen Victoria Park, which were installed for the safety of tourist busses that took the same declining route. He made a slight turn by the humming sounds of power generators, and the diminishing night steps of honeymooners who were hungry after sex. He crossed cleaner, better kept, roads, with indiscernible hieroglyphic tourist signs. He managed to roll his wheelchair through the dank grass of flowered parks and trillium masses. Soon, a black railing appeared within his sights.

He finally reached it to hear the familiar sounds of seagulls squawking, to feel a speeding car in behind him beeping in an attempt to scare him over, and to see a familiar island hidden in darkness atop The Falls.

He had often heard the legend of the recluse who had once made his home on that island. The legendary hermit lived alone in a log cabin on Goat Island. Observers often reported that the man, dressed in a monk's habit, would stroll to the end of the Terrapin walkway that projected out over the Horseshoe Falls. He would dance and pirouette and would sometimes hang carelessly from the timber, suspended by his hands or legs. He had long, dark hair and was very mysterious.

Visitors to his cabin on the island found him painting, writing poetry or playing one of his musical instruments. Rumor had it that he bathed in the upper rapids and swam about the base of The Falls. He drowned in 1831 and his body was recovered in the Whirlpool. He was the son of a well-to-do family in Plymouth, England.

Sal swallowed the memory of the legend and stood from his wheelchair for the last time. He would meet with freedom the Maker he spited.

## **The Cave of Winds**

“The Cave of Winds was once the area behind the sheet of falling water. It was a spot protected by an overhanging ledge of dolostone, allowing visitors to walk directly behind the waterfall. It was a place of romance and wonder, promises and fear. Legend had it that once a promise was made in The Cave of Winds, nothing could break it, which is why soon-to-be- married couples often made the courageous excursion.

More than a century ago, visitors hiked down a stairway to river level amid massive fallen boulders that once formed the floor of the upper rapids. Struggling against torrents of spray and wind, they ventured into a natural cavern in the face of the gorge. On his visit to The Cave of Winds, Mark Twain described the experience:

“Below the precipice, down a winding flight of stairs, and along flimsy bridges, and slashed by a furious wind that seemed determined to sweep us from the bridge and scatter us on the rocks and among the torrents below, we were almost under the monstrous wall of water thundering down from above and speech was in vain in the midst of such pitiless crash of sound. Bewildered by the thunder, driven helplessly by the wind and smitten by the arrowy tempest of rain, I bent my head, and seemed to receive the Atlantic on my back. I raised my head, with open mouth, and the most of the American cataract went down my throat. If I had sprung a leak now I had been lost. I never was so scared before and survived it.”

Scorpio listened attentively to the sales pitch of the toothless beggar at the souvenir kiosk near Table Rock, and was sold. He would have a new T-shirt to impress his expectant date at The Clift.

Scorpio strolled into the Clift from the cave hole of a full moon. He entered the bar, sticky and breathing heavy from a sultry, windless August night. A ring of sweat soaked through his top hat like an encircling halo. He approached Michael with a stained paper bag in hand. Michael sat on a stool having a cigarette. Scorpio emptied a number of business cards from the bag, taken from his strolls throughout the city, in front of Michael. The cards piled and then scattered.

“These are the people that support me against the doctors.”

He fanned a bunch of them on the bar with his shaking hands.

“They don’t have a chance in hell anymore! I made a promise at The Cave of Winds to get my revenge, and nothing is going to break it!”

The cards were those of a number of businesses in and around Niagara Falls, from hotels, to dry cleaners, to grocery stores to pet stores. Did he really believe that these people would help him, or was he simply trying to convince Michael of something Michael couldn’t yet discern. And what was this promise he made at The Cave of Winds? The Cave of Winds failed to exist since 1955, when it became so dangerous to visit that it had to be dynamited. Michael was unsure how to judge Scorpio any more. At times, like when he told his personal story, Scorpio appeared so normal. Other times he resembled a fool.

“Has Sara been here today?”

“No, she hasn’t come in today, why?”

“We have a date?”

“You have a date with Sara, when?”

“Tonight. She told me that she would meet me here, tonight. Why do you think I’m all dressed up?”

Scorpio opened his trench coat to reveal an insignia of a tourist T-shirt there, which Scorpio must have purchased on Clifton Hill. It was tacky. It read ‘The Cave of Winds’ in blurry letters across the sheet of falling water, and right below it, ‘Welcome to The Fall’, because it missed an ‘s’. Scorpio got rooked for the T-shirt somewhere and Michael grew angry that someone would sell such a thing to someone so unsuspecting.

Within the inner pocket of the same overcoat, Scorpio roughly pulled out a bunch of flowers. The slovenly bouquet included an assortment of daisy’s, some red flower Michael couldn’t recognize, and even a rose, fake as it looked. On second notice, he must have bought the bouquet at the local convenience store. Michael thought.

“This is for her, can you keep it cold in one of the fridges?”

He was so happy. And when Scorpio was happy, his back seemed to straighten out and he appeared taller. He squeezed his top hat and lifted it slowly to unleash hair that looked as if it was once parted with a wet comb. His glasses were clean and shiny. He had obviously prepared himself for something special.



“Wait till she gets here. I’m going to blow her mind!” Scorpio emphatically slapped the bar with his hand. The candle jars atop the counter of the bar trembled like dropped coins. He spun with a shuffle and stomped over to his little table to light a cigarette.

Quickly, Michael hurried into the kitchen to ask Tootz if he knew anything about this supposed date.

“Tootz, did you work with Sara today?”

“Yeah, Michael. Why? You wanna get in her pants too, eh buddy.”

“No, no, no. Scorpio comes in all dressed up, with flowers and says he has a date with Sara tonight...”

Before Michael could finish, Tootz dropped to the floor laughing.

Pulling his bony body up and trying to interrupt his impenetrable laughter, Michael asked him Sara’s plans for tonight.

“Is she at least dropping by tonight?”

“I don’t think so Michael. She has to pick up her son at her ex-husband’s house. She told me she was going to be here tomorrow for a drink.” Tootz’s voice was distorted by his choking laughter.

“I have to get a hold of her. He’ll be crushed if she doesn’t show.”

“Are you serious, Michael? Do you think she’s not going to pick up her son in Toronto because some crazy lunatic thinks he’s going to bang her tonight.” Tootz pranced around the kitchen in his know-it-all fashion, and this made Michael angry.

“He’s not some crazy lunatic!”

“Listen Michael, you came in here asking a question, and I answered it for you. What do you want me to do?”

Tootz started to chop the celery on the worktable with faster strokes.

“Give me her number.”

“Are you serious, Michael? She’s going to think your crazy. There is no way in hell she’s going to come here just because some guy, she’s probably afraid of to begin with, brought her flowers.”

Michael stared at him expecting the number and Tootz surrendered it to him. Michael rushed out of the kitchen and to the phone by the bar to call this lady. He got her

answering machine. He left a message for her to drop by the bar afterwards, not mentioning Scorpio. As he scrambled to keep the phone to his ear, Michael watched Scorpio, at his little table, shining it up with his handkerchief.

What was he supposed to do now? Michael wondered. Would Sara be home early enough to receive the message and get over there? Perhaps he should leave another message. Maybe then she would sense his urgency, and so he did.

The both of them, Scorpio and Michael, waited the entire night for Sara to arrive. Scorpio grew antsy and would often come to the bar to extend his anger at her absence, at Michael.

“You heard her say that she was coming to meet me here tonight, right?”

“To be honest with you, I didn’t hear her say anything, Scorpio.” Michael tried to smooth what would surely be another disappointment for Scorpio if she didn’t show up.

Scorpio called Michael over the bar with his finger in a covert-like fashion. Michael did as he asked, although there was no one else in the bar to keep a secret from.

“I knew she didn’t tell you.” Scorpio whispered quickly in a saliva gurgling voice.

“Why?” Michael also whispered.

“Because I’m the one she loves.” Scorpio fingered Michael to come even closer, which he reluctantly did.

“She calls me her ‘baby’,” he said rather proudly. He turned around to return to his table, where he lit another cigarette. He maneuvered his chair so that it directly faced the entrance door.

They continued to wait impatiently, and Michael couldn’t believe that he was keeping the bar open on account of her less than likely appearance. No one else bothered to visit that night, and Michael had already sent Tootz and Dawn home again, early. The time on the cash register clock read twelve thirty. Michael looked over to Scorpio and Scorpio was hunched over his ashtray and coffee, almost asleep. Michael had to do something. Michael would go over to him, and say she called to cancel or something like that. Something worse would happen.

Sara walked in with another man. The man at her side was her spineless companion, Mark.

She walked in laughing and giggling. Mark had grown a beard and perhaps some confidence. They both had a seat at the bar. She ordered drinks for the two of them. She then introduced what she thought was a mystery man to Michael, although Michael had already met him at Karaoke night. She must have forgotten, or maybe she was a little too drunk that night.

“Hey baby, this is Mark. He drives a Jag. I got your message Hon, and I called Mark here to pick me up. What is it?” She winked at Michael with the eye furthest from this guy Mark.

What was she hinting at now? Michael wondered, and why was she so confident, almost saucy. Could she have presumed that he liked her, as Tootz once suggested? She couldn't have, but what other impression would she arrive at after Michael left two messages on her answering machine, from out of nowhere. Mark got up to go to the rest room and she revealed her thoughts to Michael. She stroked his hand from across the bar.

“So, baby, you sounded pretty desperate for me on the phone. Want me to ask Mark to go, and you can drive me home, and then we can talk in private.”

Michael slipped his hand out immediately, so that Scorpio wouldn't see and grow unnecessarily jealous. She misunderstood Michael's intentions from the beginning, and probably brought this poor sap Mark, with his pretty shitty jaguar, to somehow make him jealous for good measure. What was becoming even more of a mess. Michael had heard only two days earlier that she had hit on his brother. What was he going to do now? Scorpio finally recognized the only lady's voice in the bar to be hers. He was fast approaching the bar, nodding his head for Michael to retrieve the flowers.

Having no choice or control of the matter any more, Michael did as Scorpio wished. He grabbed the bouquet of almost frozen flowers from the whirling breeze of the beer fridges, and gave them to Sara. Misunderstanding the gesture, she thanked Michael for them as she almost hopped off her seat to grab them. Michael then told her whom they were from.

“Scorpio wanted me to give these to you,” Michael said, hesitating.

Scorpio approved. He now stood upright in behind her. A big smile from ear to ear stretched his clean-shaven face.

In one rather long and silent moment, Sara quickly put two and two together, while Mark now returned from the rest room. Her face dropped instantly with disappointment, no matter how hard she tried to disguise it.

Taking obvious offense from Michael, she kissed Mark on the lips when he returned, not even considering whether or not this action would hurt Scorpio's feelings. She grabbed Mark's hand and left without finishing her drink. Although Michael wanted to see her leave, he feared she would never come back. She was a regular who put some money in the till, and a flirtatious cat who kept other regulars coming to the bar. Although Michael hated to admit it, they needed her, and now she was leaving embarrassed and would probably never return. Meanwhile, Scorpio silently retreated to his table. Michael realized that his problems weren't as bad as he first thought. Scorpio had lost the newest love of his life to another, in that old deluded game of love and war.

Michael feared approaching Scorpio in this state of disappointment, but he had to, because he wanted to close up early. Scorpio's nodded head suggested that he had already fallen into sleep, so Michael moved in tiny steps toward him. Michael rummaged his mind for anything consoling to say to him.

"Scorpio, she'll be back, don't worry. She was just trying to make you jealous," Michael blurted out, making things worse, but temporarily bandaging the situation. Scorpio quickly raised his head to shed a smile.

"You're absolutely right. Why else would she come to the bar with another guy when she knew we had a date. Did you see how quickly she kissed that guy when I gave her the flowers. She's trying to make me jealous, that little cat." Scorpio slapped the table. A cloud of ashes rose from the ashtray filled with cigarette butts.

Michael took a seat across from him, citing an opportunity to talk to him alone. Michael wanted to close altogether, and to go home, but something kept him there. He sat at Scorpio's table for about twenty minutes, not engaging in any conversation, while Scorpio seemed distracted by another world of thought.

Around the same time Michael decided to give up on a discussion, Jordan Donne and his friends just got off work and strolled in. They occupied the bar, bragged relentlessly, played pool, and drank heavily until three in the morning. Michael let them

stay obviously, because he hadn't even gone over twenty dollars in the till. He had to let them stay. Michael tolerated their antics because he needed their money.

Somewhat stressed by the embarrassing incident with Sara, Michael took his emotions out on Mr. Jordan Donne, and his insistence upon using the Clift's bathroom to do his cocaine. Around 2:30 in the morning, Michael noticed Jordan and his posse aggregating to the rest room, one after the other. Michael knew what they were up to. The other day he had found a roll of money powdered in white in the bathroom. Although Michael feared how they would react when he confronted them, he knew he had to make a stand.

Michael kicked in the rest room door, breaking the lock, and caught them red handed doing lines on his bathroom sink. Gabriel had already spoken to Jordan about it, and this is what really bothered Michael, that Jordan would continue to do it. So Michael exploded when he saw what he saw,

"Jordan, I thought we told you. You can't be doing this in our bathrooms. Now get the fuck out of here."

Michael swore, and surprised himself in doing so. He had never been so assertive with someone whom he feared upsetting.

But it did the trick that night. Jordan had never heard Michael swear before either. He knew Michael was serious and he quickly got his little mirrors together and ordered everyone else in the bathroom to leave. When they did so, he too came out as well, and took Michael aside by the bar.

"Listen, Michael. I don't want to get you upset, because I like you, and I like your brother. But don't you ever, ever yell at me like that in front of people that work under me. Never!" Jordan repeated with trembling emphasis. He sniffed heavily, and his breath was ice cold, like a damp breeze.

Michael realized that if he completely upset this guy, enough so that he would never return, it would kill them economically. He tried to smooth things over with him with some crafty false concern.

"Listen, Jordan," Michael began. "I like you. You're probably our best customer, but I can't sit back and let you do this to yourself. You're not only a customer now to us, but you're a friend, and we don't want to come to visit you one day at a funeral home."

You hear what I'm saying to you. My father built this place to be clean. and I want to keep it that way. I can't make him proud if I got guys doing coke in the bathroom. I don't want to walk into the bathroom one night and see you dying on the floor!"

Jordan stood there with an unwavering stare, as if he meant to determine Michael's sincerity. Almost instantly, he grabbed Michael and hugged him tightly. He whispered something into Michael's ear with the same icy breath.

"You're more than my own brother is to me." He pulled away to resume his normal, obnoxious self again.

"You guys know that you're the only clean place in this city, do you know that? You're the only place that doesn't sell blow, and believe me, I've been everywhere. You think it's busy everywhere else, and not here, for no reason. That's the reason, man," he said, almost disgusted by this underground fact he now presented to Michael, but not realizing that he contributed in part to such a fact.

"Have a drink with me, Michael. Come on. One drink, and I promise, I won't do it anymore in here, but only if you have a drink with me."

"Try not to do it at all, buddy." Michael meant this.

"Okay, okay, have a drink, relax, and shut the fuck up now." Jordan impatiently wrapped his one arm over Michael.

Michael agreed and closed around 5a.m. that morning, not before illegally selling Jordan a case of beer so that they could continue their party elsewhere. Completely exhausted, Michael approached Scorpio who was fast asleep in his chair, or at least, seemingly so. When he tapped Scorpio's shoulder, Scorpio reacted in shock.

He shook violently. His top hat fell from his head. His glasses spilled on the table. The ashtray full of butts toppled over and landed in a clump of ash on the carpet. Scorpio tried to stop himself from shaking by trying to grab hold of the table but the table could not support him so he fell to the brink of his chair.

Michael panicked but tried to break Scorpio's fall by attempting to grab his heavy shoulders. Scorpio slipped from his grasp and hit the ground hard. He was shaking even more violently. Michael rushed to the phone to call the Old Folks Home across the street.

"Hello, Loreto Care," a quiet, groggy voice answered.

“Hello. My name is Michael Angeli and I own The Clift across the street. Scorpio, I mean. Mr. Simms is here and he’s convulsing. He’s shaking on the ground! What should I do?”

“I’ll be right there.”

In a matter of minutes an elderly lady with pinned back gray hair and a blue cardigan over a gray skirt knocked sharply on one of the windows instead of the door. Perhaps the door was still locked. Michael rushed by Scorpio, who was still convulsing on the ground, but less emphatically, to unlock the old dead bolt.

“Where is he?” The elderly woman’s voice was placid, her facial reaction neutral.

“He’s right over here.”

The elderly woman roughly pulled Scorpio’s head from the carpet and with a swift stroke wiped the saliva, which had escaped onto his chin.

“Can you please get me a glass of water?” She looked up to Michael nodding her head.

Michael retrieved her a glass of water and she almost grabbed his fingers with the glass. She pulled out a napkin from a little leather pouch. Pressed in the design on the pouch was an Indian tomahawk. She unraveled the napkin where there were two yellow/white capsules. She placed the both of them into Scorpio’s mouth and eased the glass of water there. While they waited for Scorpio to return to his senses, the nurse took the opportunity to chide Michael in a private whisper.

“You bar owners are all the same. You don’t care about your patrons, or their welfare. It is nearly 5:30 in the morning and you haven’t even closed yet. All you care about is that till over there.”

Michael listened to the lecture with utmost attention. She was right.

“You don’t care that he has to take his medication every three hours. If he doesn’t take his medication, something like this happens all of the time. But you couldn’t care less, as long as he is buying a drink.”

“Leave him alone,” a groggy voice answered her.

Michael and the nurse turned around to face Scorpio, who was pulling himself together in his favorite chair. He was scrambling for his hat like a blind man. Michael moved to retrieve it for him.

“He takes care of me.”

“We take care of you, Zachary!”

“It’s Scorpio! For the last time, it’s Scorpio!”

“Listen, Scorpio. He needs you here to drink. Can’t you see that? If people like you don’t drink here, he can’t stay open.”

Michael remained silent although he wanted to speak up for himself. The thought of Scorpio convulsing on the ground before him had reminded him of the experience of finding his injured father on the cement floor of his uncle’s garage. The connection frightened him. The coincidence held his speaking breath still, while his heavy breathing dominated.

“Leave us alone, now!” Scorpio gave a death stare to the nurse.

“Zachary, I mean, Scorpio. I am not leaving here without you. This is enough. We can’t take care of you unless you cooperate. We can’t take care of you if you refuse to be taken care of.”

Michael felt that the nurse’s voice was now competitive in tone.

“Leave us alone, I said!” Scorpio’s tone was overpowering in depth and anger.

The nurse pulled in her cardigan and walked by Michael with another judgmental look. She then opened the door to the wake of dawn and the sounds of birds chirping.

When the door sealed the sounds outside from being heard, Scorpio turned to Michael. The personality on his face had changed and he appeared serious, almost normal.

“I should have done it a long time ago.”

“Done what, Scorpio?”

“I should have run away to find her.”

Michael assumed Scorpio referred to his friend Amaris, the friend whose house The Clift used to be. Scorpio rose to his feet. He was very tall when upright and not bent by the pains in his back.



Michael watched him venture towards the Old Folks Home across the street. But just as he was about to cross the road, he made a right angle turn towards another area. Michael watched him and pitied Scorpio for misunderstanding his destiny. Michael watched him and saw a struggle for freedom from within. Michael watched him and feared he would one day be boxed into the same plight, like a man imprisoned by the promise made behind a sheet of water and a cave of rock.

## Attic Diary

A young woman with a traveling knapsack knocked on the cedar door. Michael dropped the mop to answer it. He wasn't about to open for another two hours. Outside, an indecisive rainy day spotted the windows like tiny pellets unable to penetrate. When Michael unlocked the door, a damp breeze sliced his warm breath like a sharpened knife.

"Excuse me, but is this 13 Loreto rd.?"

Michael was appalled at the simple beauty of this woman. Adorned in a casual jean jacket, and matching jeans, with scuffed black leather boots partially covered underneath, and a thick black belt encircling her thin waist, the young woman's eyes were green and her hair a light red. She wore a beret, and she nervously clenched a bus ticket in her gloved hands.

"Yes it is. Can I help you?"

Michael motioned to let her in and she hesitated to accept the offer. She stepped in like it was a fear she was getting over. She looked around very interested.

"It's changed so much from her description."

She spoke to herself but Michael couldn't help to interrupt her private conversation.

"Excuse me?"

"This used to be my mother's home, when she was a child."

She reached around her back with one hand, pulled a zipper and showed him a black and white picture. It was a family picture taken in front of the very same building. There was a leather wrinkled man and a simple woman, and a younger daughter in between them. She was wearing a white winter coat and her hair was curlier than the young woman before him now.

"My mother is the young girl in the picture."

"What's her name?"

"Amaris Vega."

"Amaris Vega? Are you serious?" "Where is she, is she with you?"

Her green eyes creased and changed to a darker blue as they filled with water.

"My mother died recently." She paused. "On her hospital bed she told me a lot about this place. She said I should know where she came from, and it would help me find him."

"Who's him?"

"My father."

Although Michael couldn't believe his ears, and although he realized that her father had died as well, he said nothing. He had heard the story of a priest and a young girl, and their short lived love affair from Hutch the horse jockey. And he had heard the tale of two friends, Amaris and Zachary (now Scorpio), cut short because of the same priest's suicide. He had heard two accounts of the same story and Michael was confused as to what this young woman was now offering to the puzzle. Perhaps she was speaking of another father, and perhaps he hadn't heard the whole story yet.

"Maybe I can help you. What is the name of the person you are looking for?"

"A Zachary Simms," she read from the back of her bus ticket.

Michael's face must have turned white because she reacted to his loss of breath.

"What's wrong?"

"Michael, my name is Michael, I almost forgot to introduce myself."

"My name is Marie."

"It's nice to meet you Marie, and I know the man you are looking for. In fact, I know him quite well. Scorpio, I meant Zachary, used to visit us every day, except that he hasn't been here for some time now. I don't know where he's disappeared to."

She was shocked into a silent stare, which then subsided into a bland disappointment.

"You know my father?"

"Yes, I know Zachary well, and he's told me a lot about your mother too. He loved your mother very much."

She cried almost instantly, but these tears were those of smiling relief. Michael adored the way her tears glazed her porcelain skin. He quickly scampered behind the bar, to grab a tissue, while he by habit started the coffee maker on his way back. The crackling sound of the burner receiving electricity sounded like a scratched record. He

then escorted her to have a seat at a table, Scorpio's table. He asked her if she would like a cup of coffee. She paused, but then nodded with a grateful smile.

Michael retrieved two cups of coffee and brought them to the table without spilling a drop. After having removed her gloves, she cupped the warmth of the mug with her bony hands. Michael observed the steaming warmth ascend to her cheeks, making them rosy. She sniffled and used the tissue to pad her nose.

"Is he here, in the city?" She asked with a furtive glance, almost nervously.

"I don't know where he is. He used to come in every day, like clockwork, but then he disappeared one day and I've been waiting for him to return. He felt so comfortable here. This is like his second home."

"Has he ever mentioned, well, having a daughter?"

"Yes, he has. Some time ago, he told me about your mother and their childhood friendship. I think he's been waiting for your mother to return for some time now."

Marie felt the need to pad her nose again in anticipation of another onslaught of tears. Like Michael, she was matching together her own story.

"Yes, yes. My mother talked fondly of him. She said Zachary was her best friend, and that he had wanted to take care of me, but my grandfather took her away from him. He moved us to the Prairies. She wanted to come back for so many years but my grandfather made sure she didn't. While she was sick, he and my grandmother took care of me, but when she died, I had to leave. I couldn't stay any more. I had to find him. She asked me to find him and to tell him a few things for her."

"So you ran away, where are you staying now?"

"I haven't found a place to stay yet. I thought I would find him and he would take me in with him. But I guess that was stupid of me."

She dropped her face into her warmed hands.

"No it wasn't. It was brave of you, believe me."

She raised her head and forced a smile.

"Tell me something about him. I'm dying to know what he's like?"

"Well," Michael hesitated. "He is the kindest, most gentlest man I have ever met. You can tell, just by looking in his eyes, that his intentions are good, and that he would do nothing to harm you."

“You sound like you’ve grown close to him.”

“I have. I have. He’s not so easily forgotten let me tell you. He’s one of a kind.”

Marie’s body language improved after hearing this. On her face was the image of her father constructed from stories told by her mother. Michael’s new information was an additional, legible print, to this history.

“My mother spoke of an attic they used to hide in, when they were younger. Does it still exist in this building?”

“Yes, of course it does, and the telescope is still there too.”

“She spoke of a telescope too, oh my God, then it’s still there.”

“Yes, the telescope is still there.”

“No, not the telescope. Her diary. She said that she hid her diary behind one of the bookshelves. Are the bookshelves still there?”

“Of course they are.”

“Can you show me the attic?”

She shyly pulled backwards as if to imply that she was asking for too much, or being too rude.

“Sure, sure, let me get a chair.”

Michael grabbed a stool instead because it was a little taller. He dragged it to the bathroom, stood on it himself, and pushed one of the ceiling tiles up and to the side. He then grabbed the latch and turned it before he pulled himself up. Marie giggled anxiously as she watched him awkwardly climb in. Michael then asked her to do the same, and he offered her his arms. She hesitated at first, but then grabbed his forearms. He pulled her up to where he was. When she breached the upper level, she fell on top of him within the embrace. They giggled for a while. Michael breathed in her sweet scent, and as her weight rested against his in the attic, he felt like his strength could protect her from further tears, and he liked the way that made him feel.

She slowly rose to stand up and her neck bent so that she wouldn’t bang her head. She observed the dusty scene as one who had just seen the ocean for the first time, or as one who had finally seen the place where a fairy tale was set. She tiptoed around, for fear that the creaks would not support her. She went first to the telescope. Michael curled in his knees and watched her.

“Can I look?” She humbly asked, and Michael immediately nodded.

She lowered the telescope, switching eyes, like a little girl with a new toy. She noticed the scratched names of her mother and her supposed father on the windowsill. She took in a deep breath, before she assumed a business demeanor.

“My mother said that she slid her diary in between the shelf closest to the window, and the one slanted by the roof. Would you mind looking for me?”

Michael sidestepped around her and put his hand through the cobwebs in between the shelves. He searched in behind the bookshelf, high and low, before he found the diary, wrapped in a stained cloth. Inside the cloth was a black leather journal, blood stained. He handed it to Marie.

She held it in her palms for what seemed like an eternity to Michael, because he was curious as well to read it. He was hoping she wouldn't want to take it away, although he would surely understand

“Do you mind if I read it here, in the attic. My mother told me that she would escape up here, from my grandfather, so that she could write her secrets in her diary. She knew he would never find her secret hiding place, although she suspected Zachary, my father, would.”

“Well, I'm sure you'll want to be alone so I'll just ---”

“Thank you.”

“No problem. If you need anything, just call me.”

Michael left her alone to read the diary. He descended onto the bar stool awaiting him in the bathroom and when he reached the floor he looked up. He hoped she would call him back up for something. He was curious as well to read the diary but he didn't want to intrude. She needed to be alone, and Michael hoped the experience would soothe her grief. She seemed to carry her grief around with her, like Scorpio, her presumed father. Michael walked into the bar area and resumed his cleaning, distracted.

*May 1967*

*I have officially started to write a diary because I have no one to talk to about these private things, not even Zachary. I've never written a diary before. I've always been afraid that someone would find it, and then discover my true feelings. And it's so hard to*

*keep your true feelings a secret, especially when those feelings revolve around someone you shouldn't admit to loving. And sometimes, I question whether or not I truly love him because I've always been taught to believe that love is taking care of, and protecting the people that are closest to you. Papa told me that, especially when Grandma was dying and she had to live with us so that we could take care of her.*

*She couldn't do anything on her own. She would always sleepwalk and talk in her sleep. And I used to listen to her mumble things I'm sure she didn't want me to hear. But how could I not hear them, we shared the same bedroom. And although some days she couldn't even remember who I was, she remembered a number of things in her sleep that she would talk about, to herself, or to whomever she was dreaming about, and I would listen. Maybe that was bad of me, but I couldn't help it. It was like putting together a puzzle of words that told a story, and I love to hear stories.*

*So, before I helped Grandma go to bed, I made sure she put her dentures in a glass of cold water. I undressed her wrinkled body, and I noticed how her breasts had sagged, and how her moles had spread like a leprous disease. She watched me, like a little baby, as I lifted her legs and pulled up her nightgown, and then I would tuck her in. She never thanked me, and on good nights only, she would say good night. And then, I would undress myself and be ready. When I turned off the lights, she fell asleep almost immediately. And then I heard everything.*

*One night, I heard her beg for a man, maybe grandpa, to press himself deeper within her. Another night, I heard her argue with a man about how she wanted to try new things, like horseback riding. The man must have accused her of being a whore, because she answered him against that accusation. Yet, on another night, her and a man were conspiring to find a place where they could make love. Grandma then described the boat dock near the Niagara Gorge; its sandy knoll, the sound of rock water bass splashing, the breeze meandering around the rock cliffs, and the reflection of the moon against the deceptive current of the Niagara River. Grandma spoke of noises in the forested area overhanging them, the friction of sand grains on her back and knees, and the scent of sand absorbed by sweat, the disintegration of her makeup. She described the man well in her sexual ecstasy. She expressed her infatuation with his features, his dark, slicked hair, his thick glistening eyebrows, and his square chin, and of course, his erect penis, and its smoothness. I listened, one night, for an hour, I think, or was it more, and sometimes I felt her dreams infiltrating mine. I began to think of men in the same way, as strangers who were different than Daddy.*

*After Grandma died, I sought other ways to learn more, and I wasn't about to find anything in Daddy's stuffy little book attic. Today, for the first time, I masturbated in this tiny little attic. I felt like I was learning about myself, and how to use parts of my body that were existing separately without me, parts that were living under a different identity all their own. It was wonderful reaching a climax, and I reacted just like Grandma would, except the man of my dreams was someone I shouldn't have thought of in this way because he is a man of God. He is our new priest, Father Benjamin, who has been here for no more than three months now. He's originally from California, and his skin is dark*

*as are his features. It was only when I saw him working outside one day, without his uniform, that I felt nervous around him, anxious to kiss him and hug him, to have him hold me and protect me in his strong arms.*

*But what am I thinking? Is something wrong with me? He is a priest and priests are not supposed to get married, especially to girls half their age. He is so kind and so strong in what he believes, and his hands are beautifully smooth. When Zachary and I wash them before Communion, I shiver when I see him dry them completely with the cheese cloth. He makes sure they are absolutely dry, and then I notice the ring he wears, and I remember I am an ugly little fourteen-year-old girl whom he would never look at, even if he were the same age.*

*Zachary is so cute. He doesn't even know, and I think he would get upset if he found out that I have a crush on Father Ben. I think Zachary has a crush on me. He is always following me around, and he treats me like a gentleman does a lady, and we're adults. Sometimes I think that I can make him happy if I tell him I want to be his girlfriend, happy enough to never want to jump in The Falls. I don't know why he wants to die. He never tells me everything and I worry about him all of the time. I know I love Zachary. I love him like I love Daddy, with all my heart, so maybe I don't love Father Ben. Or maybe, I love Father Ben but I really don't love Zachary and Daddy? Or maybe you're supposed to love people differently, because then everyone would love everyone else the same and that wouldn't be fun.*

*Whatever it is, I know I want Father Ben to touch me and I know if he were to touch me, it would feel the same as when I touch me. And I know I can be happy. Well, I think I've said enough for today, and I hope I won't have to destroy this one day because Daddy almost found it. Good night dear diary, and promise to protect my secrets forever.*

Not wanting to disrupt Marie's reading of her mother's diary in the attic, Michael skipped vacuuming the bar area. Instead, he quietly wiped down the tables. Instinctively, he went to Scorpio's table first because his table was always the dirtiest. But it had remained clean since Michael last shined it. Michael imagined Scorpio's reaction if he were to walk in and see the daughter of his best friend Amaris. Michael knew it would shock him. From Scorpio's description of her mother, Marie appeared to look the same except for the absence of curls in her hair. Scorpio would think that she was her mother, perhaps, and that would definitely disturb him.

Her historic significance captivated Michael. Her beauty was humble, like it didn't know itself. Her reality was surreal, like she had been plucked from a recounted myth. It took a lot of courage for her to runaway. It took a lot of courage for her to want



to find her father after all of these years. Her mother must have painted quite the picture of her best friend Zachary.

*May 1967*

*I know you're supposed to write in the diary every day, but that's hard for me because some days I have nothing to say. So forgive me, dear diary, if I have been rude over the past couple of days, and please keep your promise to protect my secrets. Today, I have a lot to talk about because today was one of the scariest days of my life. Zachary tried to kill himself today, and luckily I found him by The Falls. But this time, he didn't leave me any hints and I truly believe that God, or Saint Claire, made me wake up this morning to see him through the telescope. He left to go home now. He snuck out of his house to see me, and he knows that if he gets caught he'll get in a lot of trouble. But he doesn't seem to care about anything else but me when I'm around. He is so sweet.*

*Tonight, I taught Zachary how to dance and things got out of hand. I was feeling those strange nervous rumblings again when Zachary had his little hands around my waist. I let him touch me tonight. I put his hands where I normally put mine and I showed him how to rub the spot that makes me feel like exploding with tears of joy. He was shy when I kissed him, but he was so sweet and tender. He let me touch him as well. I had never touched a man's organ before and I was curious to ask him to show it to me, because I've never seen one before, never, not even in a book. One time I saw Daddy in his underwear, and I saw it pointing through, underneath. Another time, I heard Grandma describe it in explicit detail, one night, when she was dreaming, but I've never seen one for myself. I don't have a boyfriend like some of the girls at school, who brag that they get to see one. I wanted to see Zachary's today, but I was happy enough to touch it, and to play with it. But poor Zachary let himself go in his pants and it went right through. I helped him to clean up, and I cleaned my kilt, where there was a little spot. He then left.*

*It was nice of Father Ben to stand up for Zachary today, when his parents and Daddy wanted to send Zachary to a doctor in Hamilton. Hamilton is almost an hour a way, and Zachary would be all alone if he went. He would be so afraid because he doesn't understand why he wants to kill himself. It makes him afraid, so afraid that he only wants to kill himself more. I personally believe it's The Falls that makes him want to jump. In one of Daddy's books in the attic, it says that cataracts and waterfalls have always been associated with love, passion, and obsessions that lead to suicide. One of Daddy's police officer friends once said that there seems to be a hypnotism about The Falls that allures people into its power. He said they go there in sound health and it seems to fascinate them with its grandeur and rainbow beauty. But as soon as troubles come they once again think of the place, and although they are 25 miles away they cannot seem to shake off the influence, and they head for The Falls as though they were bewitched, and then the papers report another man or woman missing. But I'm not going to lose Zachary. I'm going to take care of him, and look after him, just like I did with Grandma. And before long, he's going to forget how sad he is. Father Ben will help too. I just know it. Oh, before I forget dear diary, Father Ben did something that I found*

*strange today, and some days I wish you could talk back to me and tell me what you think, but maybe if I keep writing the answer will come to me. He shook my hand before we left him standing at the cemetery before the Church. He shook my hand and softly held it. I had goose bumps, but I was afraid. I was afraid he knew that I had a crush on him. I was afraid that he knew I touched myself. He is a priest and it is his job to see inside people, that's what Daddy says, and today, I felt like he saw right into my heart.*

*Am I making too much of this, diary? I think I might be. It's just, like I said before, I can't keep track of things that are happening with my body because I feel they are happening without me knowing. So many times, I feel unlike myself, and like somebody else, like the way I feel in my dreams, when I know, within my dream, that I am existing only in my dream, but I'm just as unsure of that. Please forgive me, diary, if I am confusing you, because I am surely confusing myself.*

*I miss Zachary's company already. Oh, how I want to just hug him and make sure he's all right. He loves me so much, and I love him too. Goodnight, diary.*

Another knock sounded on the front door and Michael hoped it was Scorpio. It wasn't. It was a fat, sweaty man with receding thin hair and an Adolf Hitler mustache.

"My name is Don. I spoke to your mother about purchasing the bar and she asked me to drop by and look around. Do you mind?"

Michael was shocked but he let him in nevertheless. The man had a burly, guttural voice, which seemed to echo from his round belly.

"From the look on your face, son, she didn't tell you?"

"No, she told me. I just forgot. Here, let me show you around."

Michael gave him the grand tour. In the process Don revealed his credentials.

"I used to run a restaurant long time ago, before I became a pepperoni salesman. This is a nice place, nice bar. Where is the kitchen?"

Michael escorted him to the kitchen. He was worried about Marie in the attic and often didn't hear some of the things Don was saying.

"You've got the grill and the fryers in the wrong place. They should be here, so that you can turn to the work table and make the platter."

Don demonstrated his words by miming the actual action. Michael smiled and nodded his head.

"And this is all wrong too, you should rip out those cupboards and put them over there, tear off the drawers cause you just don't need them and they decrease speed, you see what I mean."

“Yes. I see what you mean. Are you looking to run a bar or restaurant?”

“Both. of course. I want to turn this place into a steakhouse slash seafood restaurant with a maritime theme. I’m an East Coaster, you see, and I’ve got a contact who will send me the best looking lobsters you’ve ever seen. let me tell you.”

Don licked his lips as if he tasted the food he was describing. The bottom of his mustache was a little wet.

“Well, how serious are you about buying it?”

“I wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t serious, boy.”

“When would you like to take over?”

“November 1<sup>st</sup>.”

“That’s not even a month away.”

“The sooner the better. I want to get together with your parents soon to discuss it. Can you give them that message for me?”

“Sure.”

Michael was shocked. Don appeared more than serious about buying the bar and he was already speaking like it was his to change.

“Let me buy you a drink.”

“Thank you, that’s awfully nice of you.” Don waddled out of the kitchen and Michael escaped behind the bar to pour him a glass of draught.

“You know what you guys need?”

“What’s that?”

“You need to run lines under the bar and to the kitchen cooler so that you could hold more draughts. Two kegs just doesn’t do it...”

“Really.”

“I like this place a lot, actually. It needs some things, a new theme. Don’t like the name. Needs a better menu, but I don’t blame you guys. You’re just kids, what do you know,” he commented in a belly bursting chuckle, indirectly insulting Michael and his brother.

Although insulted, Michael smiled. They had opened the bar for this very reason, to sell it. And now, their first offer was sitting before him. Michael hoped that the offer was half the size of Don.

*June 1967*

*Zachary and I served a funeral tonight. The man who died was old. He fell into the Niagara River while he was fishing. Papa said he drank too much. Rumor has it that they found him piece by piece, in between two rocks, near the Niagara Gorge. The coffin was closed in church, and I'm glad they didn't open it. Zachary was afraid, and he almost dropped the wine. Father Ben caught hold of the tiny bottle before it dropped, and then he smiled at me. After I walked Zachary home, I saw Father Ben at the cemetery gate. It was late and he was smoking. I never thought Father Ben smoked. He was just standing at the gate, like he was waiting for me, or waiting for the old man to rise from the soft soiled blanket where he was buried.*

*He must have heard my footsteps because he knew it was I without having to turn around. I could see his words firing through the diverging clouds of smoke.*

*"Hello Amaris."*

*"Hello, Father Ben, are you all right?"*

*He turned around and tried to hide his cigarette.*

*"I'm sure you've heard the rumors about the old man."*

*"Yes, I have."*

*"Don't believe everything you hear, Amaris, because people love to gossip.*

*Gossip survives life, isn't that sad?"*

*"Yes it is, Father Ben. I'm sure none of it's true."*

*"You're right, I'm sure none of it is true. But he has no one left to defend him, Amaris. He has no family. He lived alone, he died alone, and now he can't even defend himself, and he has no children to defend him against what people say."*

*I simply nodded. I couldn't understand why Father Ben was so sad. I was sure he had provided his services for a number of funerals. Why was this man any different?*

*"Are you going home now, Amaris?"*

*"Yes, I have school tomorrow."*

*"Perhaps I will see you there. I am dropping in tomorrow."*

*"Come between ten o'clock and ten thirty, Father Ben, because we have geography then, and Mr. Balanoski is so boring."*

*Father Ben giggled, and I was happy to see him smile. He is such a beautiful man, in every way, dear diary, and I wonder if it shows on my face, and to him, how much I admire him.*

*"Come and see me more often, Amaris, I enjoy talking to you."*

*"I will Father Ben."*

*And so I left him near the cemetery garden, thinking. I felt awkward, talking to him alone. I felt like there should have been a congregation of people watching us, like at Mass. I felt he wanted to say more to me, but couldn't. Maybe he thinks I will tell on him, maybe he should think of writing in a diary as well.*

Don agreed to Michael's offer of having another drink. This was his third. He downed them quickly, like tap water. And every time Michael poured him another, by the time it reached the bar, it was half emptied.

"Do you have family, Don?"

"Yes, in fact, I do. I have a son and a wife. We live nearby, in Fonthill, you know, where all the rich people live. But let me tell you, if you guys ever make money one day, never live there. Everybody's a snob in that area. If you're not a lawyer or a doctor they treat you like lower class. I want to move. As soon as I buy this place and make it a success, I'm going to build a mansion on a vineyard somewhere in Niagara on the Lake."

"Wow. Sounds nice. I like Niagara on the Lake. It's more peaceful than Niagara Falls, but you won't escape any rich people there."

"I know, but by then I won't care because I'll be the same." He coughed up a lung-dropping chuckle, and then subdued himself.

"Well, I'd be lying if I told you I wasn't already close, but a place like this has been my dream for some time now and I want my son to have something just in case he doesn't want to go to school."

"I miss school. I think after this experience, I might go back to get a graduate degree."

"Don't bother, it's a waste of money. Look at me, I'm a success with a high school degree."

"My father doesn't even have that."

"Oh, really."

*May 1967*

*After Mass today, I followed Father Ben downstairs to watch him pray. Zachary had to rush home to finish his homework and then he said he would come by the house. While I wait for him, I will describe to you, dear diary, how beautiful Father Ben prayed. He knelt down in front of a cross by the confessionals and closed his eyes. It was so dark downstairs, but I wasn't afraid with Father Ben there. I watched, from behind a number of broken pews, and dusty boxes, Father Ben yell at the cross. He would mumble to himself and then explode, like he couldn't withhold his passion any more. He was angry with Jesus for not helping him. He asked him why he felt the way he did, and why he*

*couldn't control his desires. He said he felt torn, and not like himself. He wanted Jesus to save him and he begged as if Jesus would help him then and there. He started to cry. And then he placed his face in his hands. I decided I should leave and when I did so, the broken pew that I leaned against creaked. I think he turned around, but I was already running up the stairs before he could see me. Oh, I hear Zachary knocking on the attic door. Goodnight, dear diary.*

“Well, it was nice meeting you today, Don. I wish you all the best.”

“Tell your parents that I’ll have my lawyer get in touch with them. Right now, someone owes me a lot of money, and once I receive it, we’ll close the deal and you’ll be free of this place.”

“Yeah, free.” Michael spoke to himself.

*May 1967*

*I want to tell Father Ben that I love him and that I can't stop thinking of him. Do you think he will understand, dear diary? I have to go to school.*

Michael locked the door when Don left. There was still another hour before opening time. Michael at once felt relieved that the bar would be sold, and tired. He felt so tired all of a sudden, like the knowledge he would one day not work at The Clift convinced his body not to push itself any more. He quietly walked to the bathroom and listened to hear if Marie was all right.

“Marie, is everything all right. Can I get you anything?”

“No, thank you.”

*May 1967*

*The most wonderful thing happened today. Father Ben visited our school to offer us the Sacrament of Confession. He sat in the little room next to the library, and I waited in line to speak to him. I wanted to tell him then and there, how I felt about him, and I wanted to ask him if he thought I was wrong or bad. So I waited, and Zachary went before me.*

*When I entered the brown room with paper paintings on the walls, paintings of The Falls, and shut the door, I asked for his blessing with head bowed before I started to confess my sins. Except, that before I could tell him one, he confessed his sins to me.*

*"I'm so sorry, Amaris. You have to forgive me. I've had inappropriate thoughts concerning you, and I am begging you to forgive me for committing adultery in my heart."*

*I was surprised to hear him say those words, and I felt that the experience was somehow unreal, like the dreams of him I had held to myself, and only expressed to you dear diary. I was confused and so I asked him.*

*"Is it bad, Father Ben, to imagine yourself with somebody naked, even if you love him?"*

*"Yes it is Amaris, especially when you are a man of God, and those imaginings are of a girl half your age."*

*"But I feel that way about you too, Father Ben. I think about you all the time, and especially when you're not around."*

*I put my hand over my mouth because I feared having said something wrong in his holy presence. He noticed my fear.*

*"Amaris, this is wrong. Please, I'm going to give you absolution now." And before I could say another word, my head was bowed again, and I received my absolution. I left him alone against the backdrop of amateur paintings pinned to the wall.*

*After Zachary walked me home, I waited for Father Ben to walk back to the church. When I saw him coming, I ran out of my house and met him before he went in the church.*

*"Father Ben, Father Ben." I screamed for him to see me.*

*He looked at me and increased his pace.*

*"Please Father Ben, please." I started to scream and cry.*

*He immediately ran towards me and placed his soft hand over my mouth. My tears wet his hands, I'm sure. He begged me to quiet down.*

*"Ssssh, Amaris. Sssh, let's go downstairs."*

*I followed him downstairs, and to the area by the cross, where I previously spied on him before. But this time I was so afraid, dear diary, like he had caught me doing something bad and was taking me to be punished. His grip on my hand was strong, too strong.*

*"Amaris, things are getting out of hand, and we have to put a stop to this before everything gets out of control." He gripped my arms and tried to shake this statement into me. It was like he wasn't Father Ben anymore. I felt in that gripping moment that he could hurt me. For the first time I was seeing him as a human being, as someone who could do wrong, and this frightened me. I had never imagined Father Ben as imperfect before. It intimidated me into telling him everything.*

*"But I think I love you, Father Ben."*

*He stared at me for what seemed like a lifetime, bent down to my height, wiped my wet hair to the side of my face, and then he kissed me softly on the lips. I felt his tears sticking to my face. Oh diary, it was the most beautiful kiss I have ever experienced, and I was shaking as he took his lips away. He then ran upstairs while I rushed home.*

Michael sat alone with a cup of coffee at the bar. He stared into the mirror and saw his disfigured reflection in the beveled grooves. The thought of Don buying the bar by November 1<sup>st</sup> seemed too good to be true. He would be free. Then what would he do? Would he seriously head back to school? Would he find a job elsewhere? He cupped the warm cup of old coffee in his hands and thought about it. What about his father? Would his father expect him to work at the car recycling business with his brother Gabriel? For more than three months Gabriel had worked there during the day and helped him at The Clift at night. Michael felt sorry that his younger brother was bogged down with more responsibility than he was. Was Gabriel feeling the same way? Did he have the same, heart wrenching thoughts of running away to find a freer life devoid of duty? Michael hated himself for thinking this way. He simply felt so alone, and only the thought of the strange girl in his attic relieved that stress with a touch of beauty. When he thought of her, he failed to see her as sexual in any way. He wondered why. She was beautiful. What was wrong with him?

*May 1967*

*Today I went to confession so that I could talk to Father Ben alone. He didn't expect me. And he didn't hear me tiptoe down the stone stairway, or glide through the confessional drape. As I knelt for confession, and made the sign of the cross, he immediately recognized my voice asking for forgiveness. In a whisper, he then rebuked me for feeling the way that I do. He said that it was not meant to be, between us, and that we should forget everything we discussed beforehand. I read him a poem that I wrote and he wasn't impressed. I grew angry with him, and I stormed out. When I left, I heard another man about to reveal his sins to Father Ben.*

*Right now, Father Ben, Papa, and Mr. Hutchinson, the horse jockey, are downstairs having dinner. I don't know what to do. I'm so confused up here, all by myself, in this attic. Maybe it's time I talk to Zachary about my feelings for Father Ben. Maybe he can help me.*

*I'm going to go downstairs, dear diary, and see whether or not I can catch a glimpse of his love for me in his eyes. If I see anything, I'll be convinced that we're meant to be together.*

*I hate him with all of my heart, dear diary. He pretends he doesn't see me and I can't pretend I don't see him. I'm so confused. I hate him.*



*I've just returned from seeing Father Ben. I snuck out of the house after Father Ben and Mr. Hutchinson left. I followed Father Ben back to the church rectory and I knocked on his crossed window. He quickly let me in once I threatened to scream if he didn't. When he pulled me into his room, I fell on top of him. His hands were ice cold, and I felt hot blood rush to my face to warm them. My heart fell and almost crashed on the rocks of my worries. It was really happening, everything I had dreamed, and I was shivering with fear. I thought of Zachary for some strange reason and he seemed so far away from me now, like we had never really been close, and he was simply a fading memory. Father Ben raised his head and kissed me, and then I returned his kiss. I then smothered him with my kisses, and he held me in his strong arms. Before long, and as my heart raced in ecstasy, I lay on his bed, undressed, and watching him remove his collar and black shirt. I was so nervous and scared that I was missing something I was not old enough to understand, but it was still happening to me. He was so gentle with me dear diary, despite how much it hurt to make love for the first time.*

*He panicked when he saw my blood on his sheets, and he ran his thick hands through his hair. But I consoled him with my kisses, and I managed to bring him back to my embrace and me. Before I left, he ripped the sheets from his bed and handed them to me. He advised me to dispose of them right away, but I've kept them. I've stashed them in my secret hiding place, in this attic. He was my first, dear diary, and I love him beyond anything I have ever loved before. I don't think I will sleep the same again, without him near me. Goodnight.*

Michael poured himself a shot of Zambuca in the coffee. He needed a jolt of energy. He needed to find the courage to talk to her when she came down. He needed to hide from her the way he already felt about her. Would she understand love at first sight if she didn't feel it first herself? He felt the urge to write something down. He felt the long ignored urge to write something, anything, most preferably about her. He hadn't had the time for so long now, and he felt compelled. He ripped a sheet from the Bartender's Bible and wrote something over a Daiquiri picture. He wrote words with no connection to one another. He scribbled out words which implied constraint, like time and place, and circled words, which implied longing, like island, and whirlpool, and gorge.

*June 1967*

*He's promised to leave the priesthood for me. When I went to visit him at the confessionals we talked for hours about our future. I was so glad he brought up the subject. I was hesitant to ask him to take care of me. I was hesitant and frightened to death to say that I needed him. I want to be his wife one day, but I didn't say that. He*

*said that he wanted to leave the priesthood, but to do so, in our area, it would start a controversy he wasn't sure he could handle. He said that he wanted to take me away to his homeland, and to California, which was not so conservative in the way they approached these things.*

*Oh diary, he talks to me like the woman I want to be. I love him so, and I want to leave with him, but I'm afraid to leave Daddy and Mama. They've been so good to me and I have no other family but them. I don't know what to do, diary, and I fear my choice. Before I could give him an answer, another stepped into the opposite confessional and I had to go. Perhaps tomorrow, I will give him an answer.*

Michael daydreamed about his future. He daydreamed about where he would end up, the house he would plan to build for his family, and the area where he wanted that house to rest. Somewhat like Don, he wanted to live on a vineyard. The idea appealed to him in so many ways, like it was ingrained in his bones. He imagined the faceless people that would be a part of his life. He imagined their different walks and their different voices, but not their actual faces. There were no wheelchairs. There were no people walking crooked or in pain. There was a reflection coming off of a body of water nearby and a hill on the other side.

*June 1967*

*I haven't been able to see Father Ben for three days. He's been busy arranging the feast of St. Anthony. I need to see him. School is almost finished and I've decided that I can't leave with him just yet. Zachary needs me, and he depends on me. If I were to leave right now, I might lose him forever. And I'm so worried, diary. I'm worried that I'm pregnant. I'm late, and I'm scared. I'm so scared that he won't love me anymore, if I tell him. I'm scared that I'll scare him away without me. I'm thinking of talking to Zachary about it. I have to make sure somehow, except that every doctor in this city knows my father, and if I get tested here, he'll surely know. I have to go and talk to Father Ben first, I have to go and tell him. Perhaps he can help me find out for sure.*

Michael rested his head on his arms. He needed to close his eyes, even if for a minute. When he did so, he saw a young boy standing on Goat Island, that little plot of land surrounded by the cascades and rapids of Niagara Falls. He saw the young child waving to the admiring crowd on both sides, American and Canadian. Above him was a sky of gulls. Approaching him quickly was a canoe with a woman inside. The woman was wearing a wedding dress. The canoe she was sitting in was filled with plentiful gifts

of food, mostly grapes and fruit. She was beautiful and faceless. She waved to him and he wanted the canoe to stop on the island, except that it hit a deceptive rock and switched directions, away from the island. The young boy watched the girl in the canoe wave, and disappear into the mist.

*June 1967*

*I hate him. I hate him. I hate him with all of my heart. When I told Father Ben that I might be pregnant, he went crazy with worry. Doesn't he even see MY worry? Doesn't he see that I'm still fourteen years old, and that Papa will kill me if he finds out? He told me that he wasn't prepared yet to take me away. How am I supposed to wait like this, especially if I am pregnant? Daddy will notice. He notices everything about me. I think he also knows that I'm in love with Father Ben, but I don't want to jump to conclusions.*

*I tried to tell Father Ben that a doctor hadn't tested me yet, but he wouldn't listen to me. I told him that I loved him and I would do anything that he asked of me, but he refused to answer me. He pushed over a broken pew in the basement and vented his anger at me.*

*"Don't tell a soul about this! I need time to think this over and figure out what to do. Maybe we can get an abortion. I have a friend in Hamilton who is in medical school. I'm sure he can do it privately."*

*"An abortion?" I couldn't believe my ears. And an illegal abortion at that. I had only heard rumors about illegal abortions from Daddy. When Daddy was a police officer he arrested a doctor who was performing illegal abortions. They had tried the woman and the doctor in court. The doctor went to jail and the woman was asked politely to leave the country.*

*I don't want to end up like her. I want to keep the baby if I am pregnant, because I want to bear his child, except Father Ben doesn't understand.*

*"No, I won't do it. I won't get an abortion."*

*"But you have to, Amaris. I can't leave for sometime, until they find another assistant pastor. What are we going to do in the meantime? What are you going to tell your father, when he's seen that you've grown?"*

*"I'll tell him I'm pregnant, with your child. I'll tell him the truth."*

*"You can't tell him the truth..." he then shouted, but then pulled back after hearing what he said. He rushed upstairs and I rushed home crying.*

*June 1967*

*Today, on the walk home from school I told Zachary I was pregnant. I'm sure of it now, and I don't need a doctor to tell me. I'm over three weeks late. I was so afraid to tell him but I couldn't help it because I needed to talk to someone and to hear supporting words. Zachary courageously offered to protect me, and I was so touched that he would lie for me. Zachary would do anything for me, and he proved that to me today, except that it's too late.*

*My first love died today. Zachary found him hanging from a tree in the cemetery grounds. I've caused so much hardship, dear diary, that I've thought about doing the same thing, over and over again, except that I believe I'm pregnant, and I want to protect my child.*

*Zachary bravely told my father that the baby was his, and I can't tell you how much I admire him for sacrificing himself for me. But now, Daddy is going to resign as mayor and he is going to take us away, far away, or so he threatened today. He said I would embarrass him if anyone found out I were pregnant. What am I supposed to do, diary. What am I supposed to tell my child, when he asks me who his father was? Why did he abandon me like this, dear diary? Why did he leave me all alone? I hate him. I hate him, and I love him, and I already miss him. And what's going to happen to poor Zachary if I leave. He needs me even more than I need him. I can't leave. I'll run away to somewhere Daddy can't find me. We'll run away, Zachary and me. Dear diary, I've ruined everything and I've hurt the people I most love. Where do I go for forgiveness now?*

Marie closed the diary and turned to Michael, who was making his way into the attic once again, in tears. He approached her and held her for what seemed like an eternity for him.

"What do I do now?"

"Let me help you. Let me help you find him."

"But what if he doesn't want to see me? What if he's forgotten about me?"

"Trust me, he is constantly in search of you. He's been searching for you for eternity. Let me help you."

"But I don't even have a home. All that I have is the little money my mother left me."

"Listen to me," Michael pulled back to face her. "He's bound to come back. You can stay at my parents' house...."

"No, no, Michael. I can't impose on you like that."

"Then we'll find you a motel. There's a million of them in this city and they're pretty cheap."

"But what if he doesn't come back."

"Then we'll go and search for him."

"I can't steal you away from your life, Michael, just to help me."

"Listen, Marie. My parents are close to selling this place. I'll help you find him."

“Thank you.”

Michael wanted to smile, but he didn't for fear that he was reacting from a state that was too happy. The mood would certainly evaporate if he gave further thought to it. A beautiful, kind, and gentle woman had literally entered his life and he had already felt a closeness to her, like she was family. He took a seat and he listened to Scorpio's presumed daughter describe the entries of her mother's diary.

## **Grapes from the Vineyard**

Mrs. Angeli waited for her husband to arrive before she made a deal about the sale of The Clift. It was early evening and her sons were bustling about trying to prepare things for what was expected to be a busy Friday night. Her son Michael was shining the oak armrest with wood oil. Her son Gabriel was restocking the bar. A very talkative Don sat across from Mrs. Angeli with his wife. Although she looked much older than he, or so observed Mrs. Angeli, they looked strangely alike. Her chin protruded from her bloated face, like his, and her long, light brown hair resembled what little he had left on his head. She wore a flowered dress with white socks and slipper like shoes. He wore a blue collared, pin stripped button down shirt with what looked like a clip-on leather tie. Usually the talkative one herself, Mrs. Angeli smiled as Don told her his plans for the place. She lost him somewhere around "steakhouse" and something about rolling his potatoes in "sea salt." She hoped that her husband would soon arrive to save her.

He had told her he would meet her there around five. He had to make another stop at his car recycling business first. Two days ago his brother Tony had installed hand controls in their onetime travel van. Also installed on the van was an automatic lift to help Victorio into the van, and a mechanized car seat to allow him to maneuver from seat to seat. Mrs. Angeli remembered the first time her husband tried the new technology. It took him close to twenty minutes to transfer himself in and out of the van. He vented his anger at her when she insisted on helping him. She had grown accustomed to taking care of him. She was happy that he had finally taken the initiative to gain back some independence. Now, if only he would arrive. She wanted to agree with any offer Don would propose but she knew her husband would disagree with her bias. She wanted her sons out of this wretched business and she worried whether it showed. So, she continued to smile. She watched her eldest son wiping the bar down with an old rag. He looked tired. His eyes were beginning to resemble hers. She wanted to leave Don and to help him but she couldn't do anything until her husband arrived.

The door opened and it was not her husband. It was that little Royce; Gabriel had often spoken of him at home over breakfast. According to Gabriel, he was a constant nuisance. He approached Michael at the bar to talk to him in secret. Mrs. Angeli couldn't hear their conversation. She simply smiled and pretended to listen to Don ramble on.

“Michael, brother. I need you to do something for me, and I’ll never ask you anything again, I swear.” Royce lifted his left hand with the cigarette. He looked serious for Royce, so Michael continued to listen.

“My ex, she’s being a bitch again. I went over there last night, you know, to drill her a few times. She tells me that she ain’t giving me no money anymore. So I looked at her, and said, what do you mean you ain’t giving me no money anymore.”

Royce expressed this surprise more with a creased look on his face. He felt he was completely in the right. He scratched his goatee mustache, bent his right knee and leaned back on it.

“You know what I’m saying, eh brother. I go over there, let her have sex with me as many times as she wants, and then, when I ask her for a little money to go and get a drink afterwards, she tells me, like she’s my mother, that she ain’t going to give me any money. That little fat whore!”

The thoughts of this rejection frustrated Royce. He began to pace in circles, as was his habit to do when he was angry or disturbed. Michael tried to control him. His mother was there and he didn’t want Royce to make a scene in front of Don, who was very interested in buying the place. He needed to control the daredevil before he plunged over the edge.

“Royce, Royce, take it easy man. Take it easy. Now tell me why, and don’t bullshit me. Tell me why, you think, she won’t give you any more money.”

Michael attempted to counsel Royce in a rational whisper. Michael noticed how the Jukebox needed to be wiped down before more people arrived. The area between the stools and the bar rest could use a broom, and even a mop.

The question stumped Royce. Michael could see, just by the stupid expressions on Royce’s face, that he was trying to think of something that would make him seem more wronged. He couldn’t. He finally settled on the truth.

“Remember a long time ago when I brought that stripper here, from down the street. I had flowers for her in the back seat of my car, the stripper, you know, because I wanted to drill her, brother. She saw me.”

“Your ex saw you here?”

“Yeah, she was spying on me. And then she saw the flowers in the back seat of my car. She thinks that I like this stripper, and that I’m having ‘an affair’. I’m not going to say that I wouldn’t leave my fat ex in a second if this stripper really did like me, but I was just trying to drill her that night. And my ex is telling my mother that I’m in love with some other broad. My mother won’t give me any more money either. My sister stopped a long time ago. And now, they’re all teaming up on me, and I’m about to rage, brother.”

Royce went on, again pacing in circles like a mutt chasing his tail.

“So what do you want me to do?”

Michael was interested in helping Royce with obvious ulterior intentions. Royce still owed him a one hundred dollar tab.

“I want you to call my ex, man. Tell her that I wasn’t even with that broad that night. Ya, ya, ya, tell her that she was already here when I got here.”

“But what about the flowers in the back seat of your car?”

“Tell her the flowers weren’t for her, but that you needed them for something, ya, you needed them for something, I’m brilliant, eh brother.”

Royce patted Michael’s shoulder with a large smirk on his face.

Yeah, you’re brilliant all right, Michael thought to himself sarcastically. Michael grabbed Royce’s cellular phone.

“What’s her name again?”

“Her name is Jen.”

Royce quickly dictated the phone number. He began to bite his nails nervously, like a little kid. Michael waited for her to pick up.

“What do you want!”

Michael should have used the bar phone.

“Hi Jen, this is Michael. I own the Clift, and Royce has asked me to call you to clarify a misunderstanding.”

“Don’t bother, Royce will never change and I’m not giving him any more money. He’ll be lucky if I let him see his son.”

“Wait a second Jen, I’ll vouch for Royce.”



“Why would you do that? What, does he owe you money too? I’m not going to pay off any more of his tabs. I’m sorry. And don’t try to make me.” Michael wondered now if he would ever see the hundred dollars Royce still owed him.

“Listen Jen, just listen a while and then make whatever judgments you want. Royce has been faithful to you. You know Royce, he likes to flirt with all the girls, but he never gets anywhere, we both know that.” Michael went on to Royce’s nodding approval, although he didn’t realize that Michael had insulted him with this remark.

“Royce is always going to do what he wants to do first.”

“Just listen to me Jen, okay. I’m not calling you for money. I’m calling to tell you that Royce does not want any other girl but you.” Michael said this to Royce’s disapproving nod. Michael put his hand out to signify that he would explain it all to him later.

“All he talks about is you and your son. But you know Royce, probably better than I do. He likes to party, that’s all. He likes to enjoy himself, but he’s harmless.”

She interrupted.

“Excuse me, but you don’t know Royce at all. Do you know that he put a knife to my throat because he needed some money, probably for some whores. Do you know that he had to stay in Toronto for a few days because another bar owner wanted to kill him, because he owed him money? He stole sponsorship money for that stupid, fucking barrel, and never gave it back. Do you know that his entire family has outcast him because he rips off everyone that’s ever been good to him? He’ll never change.”

“Just listen to me, Jen. You’re right, maybe I don’t know Royce as good as you do. But he’s been a good boy to us. He hasn’t given us any problems, and I’m calling you to ask you to give him another chance. He’s right here, and he looks really bad because I think deep down he really loves you. You share a son, and that bond will never go away. Just give him another chance, for me, and I guarantee you that he will live up to it. At least you’ll know that you have someone here, where he hangs out every day, who will watch out for him. And by the way, before he even came in tonight, he had made reservations for you and him to have dinner at seven, is that all right with you?”

Royce seemed to disapprove with his resumed pacing.

Jen stalled and a long silence on the other end of the phone signaled to Michael that she was thinking. She then asked him to make sure.

“He made dinner reservations for us?”

“Yes, will you be ready, say, around, 6:30?”

“Tell him I’ll be waiting for him.” She succumbed rather easily in a soft but stern voice. Michael now understood how easily she was pushed over, and why Royce continued to take advantage of her.

Michael pressed the off button on the phone. Royce grabbed Michael’s forearm. Michael worried what his mother might have thought. She was staring directly at them. He felt sorry that she had to listen to Don while she waited for his father.

“Brother, I appreciate what you did for me, but I gotta go back to her?” Royce’s voice was squeaky, almost childlike.

“Just smooth things over with this girl. She’s got your son for God’s sake. Try to be nice to her, starting tonight. Pick her up at 6:30 by the way, and I’ll set something up for you. If you treat her nice, take her out once and while, she won’t bust your balls so much, and you’ll be free to do whatever you want. Listen Royce, I gotta clean up before Dawn gets in. Do the right thing for once. Who else do you got, some hooker on the street that’s only going to cost you more money. You’ve got someone that’s pretty good looking.” Michael lied again just to make Royce feel proud of his only possession

“So she’s gained a few pounds, she can lose it in a week. More important, she’s the mother of your kid, brother. You can’t chose a whore over your own son?” Michael tried to convince him, although he wondered as to whom Royce would actually choose, the whore or his son.

Royce finally nodded his head in accord. He let go of Michael’s arm. Michael returned to wiping the bar counter, while Royce stood still by the kitchen door for a couple of minutes, thinking. He then walked by with a thank you and a fake smile.

“Thanks brother, I owe you one. This guy is the best friend in the world,” Royce proclaimed to the few people in the bar, including Michael’s mother.

“I’ll see you around 7,” Michael confirmed with a haphazard smirk.

Royce squealed out of the parking lot and raced down a service road. He was absolutely furious and reckless. He almost hit Mr. Angeli's van as he cut a corner at the intersection, which led to Mr. Angeli's car recycling business.

Mr. Angeli stopped to avoid hitting the muffler-rattling Tornado. He couldn't recall the emotion to curse at the careless driver, either. He was too shocked from the conversation with his brother, his partner at the business, over Gabriel, his son. Somewhat distracted by the conversation, Mr. Angeli had difficulty working the gas and brake on the hand machinery. He grabbed the roller on the steering wheel and almost turned himself into a ditch. He was surprised to hear the threats issued by his brother just a few moments prior. They had argued like they had never argued before.

His brother Tony had paged Victorio's cellular phone about an hour ago, when Victorio was just about to leave with his wife to meet a potential buyer of The Clift. Wanting to try his new independence, Victorio asked his wife to meet him there, and to stall this "Don" before he arrived. Tony said it was an emergency. He stressed that Victorio meet him as soon as possible at The Wreck yard.

So, Victorio boarded his van as quickly as he could. He needed more practice with the hand controls recently installed on his van. He managed to float out of his driveway but as soon as he had to turn, Victorio felt a little panic at being alone in a vehicle with only his wheelchair for company. Driving was not like it was before. He was lacking the confidence, which comes with having your legs as a last alternative for escape. As he drove, he worried if he should happen to crash the van. What would he do then? What if the van caught on fire and he couldn't get out. He had to be careful. So he slowly made his way, in the right lane, towards the dark tunnel, which led to the Thorold, Niagara Falls city line - the site of his car recycling business. Once he passed the paper mill on the right, Victorio opened his window to relieve the pungent smell of tar burning with rock. It only made matters worse, so he attempted the feat of having a cigarette while controlling the wheel and hand mechanisms for the gas, with one hand. It didn't take long for Victorio to take the necessary risks to have a cigarette, his favorite pastime when driving somewhere.

He let cars pass him and curse their way in front of him. He didn't mind. Although his brother sounded urgent, Victorio was in no rush. He would take his time. When he finally made it there, the orange glow of the sun was dispersing under the pile up of cars his business was preparing for salvage. Mr. Angeli slowly turned into the parking lot, making sure he didn't turn into the bordering ditch and watched his fellow workers leave before his brother finally came out. Each of the workers greeted him, including his son Gabriel, who was heading straight to the bar. Gabriel approached the driver's side window the van.

"Dad, what are you doing here?"

Victorio wasn't prepared to do anything but lower the window. It was too much effort to get out of the van.

"Your uncle Tony wanted to talk to me. What's going on? Is there a problem?"

"No problem that I know of. Uncle Tony's been quiet lately. Hey, Dad, guess what? I got these people to pay their credit bills. These guys owed us a lot of money and I've been calling them for weeks. Even uncle Tony thought it was a waste trying to get the money. But I got it."

"Good for you, Gabriel. You're just like your father."

"Thanks, Dad. I gotta go. That guy who wants to buy the bar is coming tonight. Did you already talk to him?"

"No, I'm going to go as soon as I talk to your uncle. Oh, there he is. I'll see you there."

"See ya, Dad."

"And Gabriel?"

"Yes, Dad?"

"Good job. I'm proud of you. You must be hungry. Go and have Michael make something for you."

Gabriel left with a hop in his step. He was so happy to be working at his father's business. He had a sincere love and desire to push it, and Victorio felt assured that it would be all right in his young hands.

Tony was the last to leave the building and Victorio wished he wouldn't have taken his time. Tony locked the door and the gate to the yard and then entered the van and sat on the passenger seat. He was all flustered.

"What is it, Tony?"

"Victorio, I'll tell you right now. I want your son out of the business and if you don't do it, I'm going to get rid of him myself."

"What?" Victorio's vision was blurry after hearing those words from his brother's mouth. It was as if the small area between them was still clouded with smoke.

"He's no good for the business and I want him out."

"He's no good for the business? He is a young man and he has a university degree in business? Did he do something wrong?"

"I can't begin to tell you the things he's done wrong?"

"Tell me one."

"I can't think of one, right now."

"Tony, if he's doing something wrong, tell him and he'll do it right."

"If you don't get rid of him, I will."

"Let's see you kick him out. Let's see what happens to you." Victorio was astounded and passionately angry at the same time.

"You want to see me do it."

"Let's see you try."

Tony quickly left the van and slammed the door. He left Victorio there in darkness. Victorio didn't move the car. He saw his brother's new Cadillac in his rear view mirror disappear as quickly as the sun fell. He sat there for minutes, it could have been an hour, for all he knew, abhorred at what his brother had threatened. It came from out of nowhere. It came as such a surprise.

Victorio tried to get the van into gear but it was having problems. He panicked at being stuck there the entire night when he finally realized it wasn't in gear. Like a zombie he drove along the service highway, towards the bar. It was at the intersection he almost didn't stop at where he almost hit a beige Tornado. He turned and drove down the gravel road that led to The Clift. When he arrived before the door he beeped the horn so that one of his sons would help him out. Gabriel came rushing out, chewing something.

“Hey. Dad. Let me help you.”

“Gabriel, did something happen at the Wreckyard today between you and your uncle?”

“No. Everything went fine. Like I told you, I got some of the receivables back. Uncle Tony said I did a good job.”

Victorio nodded his head and let his son aid him out of the van. Over his shoulder, Mr. Angeli noticed their cook Tootz, and his ghost-like girlfriend.

“You guys need any help?”

“No, I’m all right, Tootz. But you’re late again. Get inside!”

“Go inside, June. I’ll be right in.”

Tootz gave Gabriel a hand transferring his father from the car seat to the wheelchair. He then went to the door to open it for his boss and his boss’s father. Gabriel was the only boss Tootz could talk to lately. His heated argument with Michael the first night of karaoke had put a strain on their onetime jovial relationship. Michael now treated Tootz like an employee with one word orders. Tootz was going to apologize after work tonight and at the same time ask for a raise. Or he was going to quit. He needed more money now that he had another child on its way. He had found out earlier this week that he would be a father for the third time, when he took June to the doctor’s office for a blood sugar count.

June sat at the bar waiting to be served. She almost always ordered a beer but this time she would have to order something non-alcoholic. Tootz would cook her something on his tab and bring it out to her as well. She needed to build up her strength. He pitied her as he walked by and heard her ask Dawn for a milk with ice. Tootz should have been more careful with her. He should have got rid of her long time ago when he had the chance. She was too good to be stuck with him. He would break her heart more than it deserved to be broken. And he couldn’t help it. His addictions were many and those of the variety that were not destructive to himself but more to anyone who came within a heart’s radius of caring for him.

Tootz passed her bony back and walked with rhythm to the kitchen. He tapped her on the shoulder and when she turned around he offered her a smile. She pulled back

her gray streaked hair and sipped some of her milk from the straw. She looked like a little girl ready to please. She then resumed her conversation with Dawn at the bar, as if nothing had changed. Perhaps nothing had changed with her. Maybe she was finally happy with him. He tried but he could not find a reason to hate her anymore. And it wasn't just the fact that she was carrying his baby that made him feel this way. His eyes had opened with her. Now, the simplest of gestures, like her grooving out the center of an unlit candle on the bar, with her nails, told him something. It described to him her gentle nature, her self-sacrificial femininity. He was unworthy of her.

Tootz disappeared into the kitchen but before he did so he noticed a very large man and a resembling woman, in a flowered dress, stand up from a table to greet Mr. Angeli. Gabriel was smiling, as was Michael, who was sitting next to his mother at the table. Who were these people, Tootz wondered. They were too different from the Angelis to be friends and too foreign not to be there on business terms. Tootz shrugged off the possibility that this man was interested in the bar. Lately, the bar had finally appeared like it was doing better. Never had he imagined, from the days when only one or two psychos visited, that they would have to prepare, as he would tonight, for a "busy night". He was inwardly proud and jealous of the two boys he at onetime thought he could take advantage of. He didn't believe they could do it.

"June, would you like some soup?"

"Yes, please." She smiled. She had a wonderful smile when she wasn't worried about something. It brought life to her pallid face and almost decorated what hidden beauty she possessed. Tootz pushed through the swinging kitchen doors and heard the familiar sound of Royce's Tornado leaving skid marks in the parking lot behind the bar.

Michael rose from his seat at the table after seeing Royce's car race to the back parking lot. Royce must have forgotten his girlfriend or he wouldn't be parking there. Michael thought. The both of them approached the door like a stiff bride and groom ornament atop a wedding cake half eaten. Royce seemed to take Michael's advice. He was dressed for the occasion, in something other than acid washed jeans. He wore black pants, which were a little too short, but not so noticeable because his long cowboy boots covered up. He wore a fluffy white shirt and a bowtie.

He held the door open for his girlfriend. He appeared rather relaxed and in a calm mood. It perplexed Michael to see him like this. Never had he seen Royce not restless, or not moving. Royce always seemed to fidget or play with an ashtray, or bite his nails. He acted like a perfect gentlemen when Michael first approached them with menus - an abnormal perfect gentlemen.

Once Michael sat them down and he breathed away the acrid smell of Royce's girlfriend's perfume. Michael asked them what they preferred to drink. Royce ordered a bottle of their finest wine! Michael couldn't believe his ears or how polite Royce sounded.

Michael went to retrieve the bottle of wine. Dawn approached him, similarly shocked.

"They ordered wine? What, is that little runt going to ask her to marry him tonight, cause if he does, I'm going to have to go over there and warn the poor girl."

Dawn giggled.

"You're going to do no such thing. Take it easy on Royce tonight, he's trying to fix something." Dawn never liked Royce, and she refused to humor him like Michael. She was repulsed by Royce's sexual anecdotes. Many times when he flirted with her, in his always-direct fashion, she pushed him away rudely, not realizing that he didn't have the balls to take any action upon his words. He was a bullshitter through and through, but to Dawn he was just an asshole.

When Michael had everything on the tray, he turned and almost bumped into Royce, who stood there to block his path. Royce had left his table to go to the rest room but stopped to say something to Michael first.

"How am I doing tonight brother, all right?"

Michael tried to keep the bottle and glasses balanced on the tray steady.

"I have to admit, Royce, I'm impressed. What's come over you? You're like a different man." Michael intended to compliment Royce and wanted to build up his confidence. This is why, when he first saw them at the door, he ran to wait the table over giving it to Dawn. He didn't want her to ruin any slim chance of romance. But Royce quickly refuted the compliment with his next admission.



"I smoked a couple doobies before I picked her up, brother. I'm wired! But I'm going to have a good time. Tell Tootz we want the veal Parmesan with pasta, and keep bringing the drinks brother, she's got her credit card tonight." Royce laughed and patted Michael's shoulder, almost knocking over the tray. Michael couldn't believe Jen was going to pay for everything tonight, when only hours before she had told him that he would see no more of her money. Michael was beginning to wonder what kind of fool she was, when those thoughts reversed onto him. It was all his fault. He was the one to blame. He had convinced her that Royce would change, when Michael knew damn well that people like Royce never change. Michael felt guilty, and couldn't look her in the face as he placed the cold bottle of white wine and its two accompanying glasses on the table. He did little to distract her from checking her face in a little mirror. She was trying to determine if her make up held up to the obvious pressure of this night. She was excited all right. Her excitement fueled Michael's present guilt and he moped into the kitchen to give Tootz the dinner order.

After dinner, dessert, coffee, the works, Michael rung up a hundred dollar bill for Jen to pay in the end. And that was not all. Royce and his girlfriend left to hit the closest bank machine to cash her weekly check, so that they could drink at the bar. They returned to play pool, while Royce made the poor girl take the tab for all of the drinks, including ones Royce bought for Michael and his brother, who was surprised to receive it at the table with Don and their parents. Royce's girlfriend seemed happy. Michael tried to convince himself. Yet, he pitied her.

Soon afterwards, Royce came over to the bar to sit with Michael alone. He seemed to gloat that he was returning the favor.

"So what do you think, brother? We're giving you some business tonight. We ordered the most expensive things on the menu, we ordered wine, and drinks, eh, eh." Royce patted Michael on the shoulder. This cocky attitude disturbed Michael.

"I gotta thank you, brother. You were right. She is a nice girl. She's got a job, she's the mother of my kid. She's not too bad. You want another drink?"

"No thanks, I can't finish this one."

"Drink, drink. We're celebrating, brother." He gave Michael a wet kiss on the cheek that Michael wiped away rather quickly.

“Hey brother, let’s have a shot...come on...let’s sit down and have a drink.”

Having no other excuse that Michael could think of on the spot, Michael joined Royce for a shot at the bar, just the two of them. Royce’s girlfriend sat a few seats down, talking to Dawn about something.

“You’re going to do well, brother. You guys are good people. You gotta a nice place, you’re young. I wish I was like you guys.”

“Royce, it’s not all what it’s made out to be.”

“What do you mean? You guys are doing well now. You drive good cars, you dress nice, you got it all man. Your father involved, brother, in the Mafia? I saw his Cadillac, brother. It’s a nasty car.”

“He’s not connected! The only thing he’s connected to is that fucking wheelchair.” Michael looked over to his parents who were sullen looking. His father had his hands crossed in his unfeeling lap. He seemed to be listening but not understanding Don’s mouthing off.

“But he’s got coin, brother, just admit it.”

“He’s got money because he worked all his life for it, he deserves it. But now look at him, he can’t even enjoy it.”

“I wanna be connected, brother.”

“Royce...no, I’m not even going to bother with that statement.”

“What, brother? You can’t see me as a Mafia boss, brother, like the godfather.”

“What about the daredevil business, and the barrel?”

“It’s growing old. Everybody and their mother’s gone over The Falls in a barrel. I’d be stupid to go over.”

“But I thought that was your dream Royce.”

“Dreams are meant to wake up from, Michael, and never remembered again. I don’t believe in dreams. What have dreams got me, nothing!”

Royce took a sip of his warm beer. He looked over to his no longer ex-girlfriend, and then turned again to Michael.

“What do you mean, nothing? You have a son, a woman, a job. What more can you ask for?”

"I could have been like you, Michael. I could have had my own place by this time, rolling in the cash, banging broads all the time, but my father fucked me."

"Why, what did your father do?"

"My grandfather was a marksman, an assassin in Yugoslavia during World War II. He worked for Germany, for Hitler I think, that's the right war, right?"

"Ya, ya, go on".

"You know how much money he made for being a traitor. Millions! And when he died, he gave it all to my father, and you know what my father did. He left us. He left all of us, his whole family, my mother, my brother, me, his brothers, and went around the world gambling it all, spending it on whores, that son of a bitch. He doesn't even have ten thousand left! He married some hooker and came back. When my mom heard he was back she killed herself in the bathtub, all because of him."

Royce put his hand over his already red-rimmed eyes.

"I'm sorry to hear that Royce. When's the last time you talked to him?"

"Today. I went over there to ask him for some money and he told me to fuck off!"

Like father, like son, was the first thought that entered Michael's mind. Royce's girlfriend was trying to gain Royce's attention by waving to him. Michael left his seat at the bar to join his parents at the table with Don. When he approached the table, Don was going on about his future plan to buy a vineyard after he bought the bar and made a success of it. Michael's mother seemed interested in this part of the conversation, for some reason. She leaned on her hands and smiled.

Mrs. Angeli remembered the first time she met her husband. They were children, in Italy. The people from her tiny village in Spezzano were invited to the mayor's house to celebrate the Feast of Santa Liberata, a patron saint of the area. It was a beautiful day. The mountains seemed to pierce the sky with their pointed peaks, as if to steal the spring water that flowed first to the mayor's house. He had a natural spring outside his house that the group of children from the village took turns taking a sip from. It almost froze her teeth, Mrs. Angeli remembered, as she attempted to swallow some. The cold mountain water was one of the few memories she held fast to on the long boat ride to

Canada, when she became sick over and over again. From the moment the boat docked in Halifax, she had contracted sickness after sickness, which would weaken her over the years. But the ice cold water could never do anything but wake her up to the beauty of her homeland. Her husband often thought the same, and he spoke of their homeland like a fairy tale place of magic and mischief. She had met him at the fountain and he had invited her and her relatives to play hide and go seek in the mayor's blossoming vineyard.

Mrs. Angeli agreed with hesitation. She was only seven years old but her family had warned her that the Teanos were a violent, ignorant people. She had heard horror stories about her husband's uncles and aunts, and how on one occasion, they took to knives to settle an argument. Victorio's aunt spoke back to her husband when he had asked her to fetch a glass of water from the well. Upon her refusal, and when she turned her back, he threw a knife at her, piercing her buttocks. Her brother, Victorio's uncle Tony, was there to defend her, while she stood at the doorway, wailing and bleeding in pain. As a child, Mrs. Angeli's mother told her this story to warn her not to involve herself in any way with the Teano family. But Mrs. Angeli, as a young girl, could not resist the temptation to play hide and go seek in the vineyard. And so she went with her cousins and friends from the village.

She pranced freely through the blossoming vineyard, the smell of flowers and honey filling the air, until she came across Victorio. He was wearing gray shorts, which were onetime pants, cut at the knees. His legs were slightly bruised above his ripped socks and his shoes were muddy from the soft soil of the vineyard. His hair was crew cut and his eyebrows dark and mysteriously hiding his even darker eyes. He stopped when he saw Isabella Amora. She was dressed properly in her best summer skirt and matching shoes. Her black hair was thicker then, and held back by hairpins.

Without words, as would be his trademark in the future, he leaned in and kissed her in the vineyard. Her teeth might have still been cold from the water spring. It happened so fast, she didn't have time to be angry with him for not asking. He quickly hurried away when he heard the sounds of other kids approaching. Mrs. Angeli however, remained still.

Afterwards, the entire village celebrated the feast of Santa Liberata, the patron Saint of the village. In the midst of people dancing and celebrating, and after the

procession with the statue down the mountain. Mrs. Angeli searched for Victorio, not knowing his name yet. She searched because she realized this would be her last day in her homeland, and she would possibly never see him again. She searched because she wanted to know why he had kissed her. She wouldn't find him that night, but she found him by coincidence in Canada, at a party her brother held to welcome new immigrants to Canada. She met him at this party and saw the same look in his eye, which she remembered from the vineyard, upon seeing her somewhat grown up. Before he left the party, he had told her brother about his interest in her. But Isabella's brother warned her about the Teano family. Isabella went to her room and looked out the window to see her uncle pruning the three vines he had planted outside the small house about ten of them shared. She remembered the blossoming vineyard, and wondered whether Victorio remembered the same.

"So, what do you think? He wants to pay some next week, and the other half after he takes over," her husband asked her.

The gleam in his young eyes had left to be replaced with a darker concern for their children's welfare.

"It sounds fine to me. So, you still want to take over November 1<sup>st</sup>?"

"Yes, because then I would be able to do....."

A young woman hesitatingly walked into The Clift. Michael quickly left the table to greet her.

"Michael?" Mrs. Angeli called to him.

"What, Mom? What is it?"

"Can you get us another bottle of wine, please?"

"Sure, Mom, in a second."

And then she saw it again. She saw the gleam in her son's eyes as he approached the girl at the door. Michael first brought her to the table to introduce her to everyone.

"Everyone, this is Marie. "

"Nice to meet you Marie."

"Nice to meet you too."

Michael escorted her to a table fit for two. He had already forgotten about the wine.

“What are you doing here, Marie?”

Michael found her radiant tonight. She wore a blue v-neck top over her jeans. Her hair was pulled back with hairpins.

“I wanted to see you, Michael.”

“Why is that?”

“I wanted to talk to you about my father.”

“What do you want to talk about?”

“I can’t expect you to help me, Michael. You have a life here, and I know we’ve talked about it, but I can’t tear you away from your family to help me find mine.”

“Marie, I thought we already talked about this the other night by The Falls. I think I’m falling for you.”

She smiled.

“I have never met anyone like you. Remember the other day when we searched for your father in Niagara on the Lake. Remember when we lost ourselves in the vineyards. Do you remember? I saw you for the first time that day as someone I wanted to live for. I want to help you find your father because I miss him too. And I want to take care of you, the both of you.”

“But Michael, but what if takes us to places far away.”

“I’ll come with you because I’ve never felt this way before.”

“But what about your family, Michael. I know how important they are to you.”

“My family will understand. I can’t let you go Marie and live knowing that I feel like this about somebody, unless you don’t feel the same.”

“I felt the same way in the vineyard, Michael. But there is an empty part of my heart that needs to find him.”

“I understand, and I want to help you. From the looks of it, Don really wants the bar for November 1<sup>st</sup>. They’re working out the details as we speak. I’ll be free to go with you, Marie.”

Marie smiled and looked over to Michael’s mother, who was staring back at them.

“Gabriel, who is that girl?”

“You’re not going to believe this ma, but I think your son is in love. You remember Scorpio, the guy who used to come in here all of the time. That’s his daughter. This place used to be her mother’s house.”

Mrs. Angeli glanced over again with concern until a sound interrupted her at the bar.

“You’re not having any more!” Dawn’s adamant voice rang out so that everyone could hear her in the bar.

Royce searched around the bar looking for Michael, who finally heard him and hurried to the bar.

Royce complained loudly.

“I want to buy the people in this bar, and myself, another round. What’s wrong with that?”

Michael looked to Dawn and she returned him a disapproving look.

“He’s had more than enough, and she doesn’t have her license.”

Royce’s girlfriend nodded in behind Royce so Royce couldn’t see her.

Seeing that Royce’s girlfriend disapproved of Royce’s buying another round of drinks, and feeling sorry for her for footing the bill, Michael tried to calm him down.

“Royce, I think she’s right. You have had enough. Let me call you a cab, and..”

Royce snapped.

He ran out of the bar cursing and swearing. Gabriel left the table and followed Michael out in an attempt to calm him down, but Royce was very angry. He kicked the fender of his own car to express his disgust.

His girlfriend obediently followed him out, and routinely made her way into the driver’s seat. Perhaps she had lied to Dawn about not having a license just to get her to stop Royce from drinking. Royce continued to kick the fender of his car and Gabriel, most appreciative of what it might have cost, tried to stop Royce from doing any more

damage. Royce grabbed Gabriel by the shirt and shouted with rage stated over and over again.

“I’ve been disrespected...”

Royce finally found his way to the passenger seat. Before they left, Royce rolled down his window half way.

“I’m not paying my tab.”

Like Bonnie and Clyde, they sped off into the night.

Gabriel stormed into the bar area and saw his parents, Don and his wife, staring at him. They were smiling and giggling. Embarrassed by the incident, he asked Dawn if he could speak to her alone in the back. She went before him and he followed, smiling back to his parents. Dawn waited for him impatiently next to the garbage bin.

“Don’t tell me I did something wrong because I didn’t. All I did was refuse to give him a drink, which is my right as a bartender. I swear, I’ll quit if you say I did something wrong.”

“You knew he still owed us a tab.”

“That has nothing to do with my responsibility to...”

“You’re fired.”

Without a second word, Dawn puffed and then rushed through the hallway and bar area in tears. Gabriel followed her and met Michael at the doorway.

“Do you think we can find someone for another two weeks?”

Without even asking why Gabriel fired her, Michael looked over to Marie, sitting alone at Scorpio’s table. She needed a place to stay and the money, and he wanted to keep her there until he finalized his decision to run away with her.



## Halloween

Michael parked his car in visitor's parking. He grabbed dusty change from his ashtray and filled the parking meter. It read fifteen minutes. He then took in the site that was the Niagara General and sighed. He followed the sidewalk path to the lighted sign, which read Emergency. The automatic doors opened for him instantly, like gates to an inviting place. He wondered whether the Gates of Heaven were so inviting.

He passed the familiar surroundings of the emergency room. The one nurse at the desk behind the window paid him little attention. She could tell he was just a visitor. The seats in the waiting room were nearly taken by waiters. Michael recognized those anticipatory looks, expecting the footsteps arriving from around the corner to be a doctor's. He wanted to apologize for the scare. He wanted to assure them that he knew how they felt. He knew they wouldn't care.

Michael approached the desk.

"What floor is intensive care here?"

"Intensive care, third floor." The nurse behind the window returned to her paperwork without a second thought.

"And the gift shop?"

"Just around the corner." This time her eyes didn't raise from the paper.

With a glance to the sound of automatic doors opening, and the false alarm of an ambulance driver walking in with a coffee, Michael turned around the corner and quickly found the gift shop. The items had a hospital signature to them, even the flowers. It was as if they conformed immediately to the sadness around them. The red flowers that he quickly grabbed seemed a duller red. He paid for them with the change he had left in his pocket. He proceeded towards the elevators.

When he reached the intensive care unit, it was dead silent on the floor. He recognized the silence. It was as deafening a roar as The Falls itself. It was thick like the currents of water plummeting over the cliff of the escarpment and it had rapids, which pulled you closer, against your will, to the person you wanted to see.

Michael approached the desk where three nurses bustled about. He asked to know where Jordan Donne's room was.

"Jordan Donne?"

“Oh, the overdose. He’s in ward three but you have to wear a gown. There is a hospital infection on this floor.”

Michael recognized the yellow signs before he had reached the desk. When his father was in the hospital, they also made all visitors wear gowns to protect the vulnerability of the patient. Michael grabbed a gown, some gloves and a mouth mask and slipped everything on over his dress clothes. Tonight was their last night at The Clift and he was still considering whether or not he wanted to dress in costume. Perhaps he could dress in the garment he was now wearing. He saw others, dressed in yellow gowns and gloves pass him by. It was like a uniform in some science fiction movie.

Michael stalled a bit before he made his way to Ward 3. He wasn’t sure whether he could handle seeing someone in such a state for the second time. He pulled the mouth mask down for a second and took a couple of breaths. He felt he couldn’t breathe with it on. He pulled it up and walked towards Ward 3.

He looked in first and noticed that Jordan lay on the bed closest to the door. Sitting in the only chair at the foot of his bed was a little blond girl. She wore the yellow gown as well, but she held a rag doll in her hands. She sat in the chair kicking her feet, like she was on a swing. Michael watched her for a few seconds. Her eyes were a dark blue and she was often agitated with the itchiness of the mouth mask as well. She tugged on its side but never pulled it down.

Michael walked in and she immediately paid attention to him. Michael approached her and gave her one of the flowers.

“Hi, how are you? What is your name?”

“My name is Jordy.” He voice was shy but appreciative.

“Why are you here, Jordy?”

“That’s my Daddy.” She pointed to Jordan lying on the bed.

Michael rose from his knees and walked over to the side of Jordan’s bed. Michael’s back was to the curtain that separated a row of other patients.

“Hey, Jordan. It’s Michael, from The Clift.”

Michael glanced over to an attentive Jordy. He felt sorry that she had to wait around for her father to wake up again. Although Michael had gone through the same thing, he could not fathom how she was able to do it.

He then remembered when that fear first attacked him. It occurred when the ambulance had first rolled his father into the emergency room. Michael stood still while they tried to stabilize his father with needles and bandages. The nurse then approached Michael with his father's jewelry. Michael had always been embarrassed by how much gold jewelry his father had worn. The hurried nurse handed Michael his father's gold necklace, with the Crucifix, and his father's gold wedding ring. Michael slipped the ring in his pocket and wore the necklace. He was not too fond of wearing gold chains but he promised his father silently that he would take care of his family until his father returned to resume that position.

Michael looked over to Jordan's daughter and noticed that she wore her father's ringed earrings. Michael then glanced over to the window and saw a woman there staring back at him. Perhaps that was Jordan's wife, or girlfriend, or the girl he impregnated by accident. Michael wasn't sure. Michael wasn't sure of anything anymore. He was dying to promise Jordan's daughter that her father would soon wake up but he wasn't sure of that either.

He looked down to Jordan Donne and saw how they shaved his white chest so that they could glue the heart monitor. Wires dangled upwards toward a beeping machine while the heavy breathing sound of the ventilator made the area around him a little more humid. Jordan's blond streaked hair was combed back and the dark bags below his eyes had not yet disappeared. Michael found it difficult to recognize the man without the smirk. He did recognize the redness around the nose but this time it was caused by the respirator plug.

Michael made the sign of the cross to assure the woman at the window that she could trust him, although she couldn't recognize him with the gown on. Michael then bent over and whispered something in Jordan's ear. "Thank you for the drink, buddy."

Michael left the room but before he did he dropped his mouth mask to smile at Jordy. Her eyes creased and Michael knew she smiled.

When he left the room and began to undress, the blond haired woman approached him.

"You're the owner of The Clift, aren't you?"

Michael expected to hear an onslaught of blame and judgment.

“Thank you for coming to see him. He spoke sincerely of you boys, and it was one of the only times I felt he was himself, when he spoke of you two.”

Michael’s eyes watered and he knew he had to get out of the hospital before he started to cry. He knew too well how quickly the sadness of the hospital environment stuck to you, like a virus.

He walked with a determined pace toward the sound of elevator doors opening. He tore off the gown and gloves and squeezed them into a ball. He threw them into a blue bin full of diapers and garbage and slipped through before the elevator doors closed. When he was in the elevator the people waiting for him there looked strangely at him. He was still wearing the mouth mask. He quickly discarded it and squeezed it in the palm of his hand.

Michael walked through the lobby in the direction of the emergency exit. He dropped the mask without notice and rushed to his car. On its windshield was a ticket. He took the ticket, stuffed it in his pocket and drove in the direction of The Falls. He turned the volume level of the radio down and listened to the hum of his car driving. He passed a suburban area of replicated model homes and dreaded his future in one of them. He breached the area and crossed into an alternative downtown area, which was newly designed to attract tourist money. Its signs were glittery and new but its buildings were old and never renovated. Michael drove past an assortment of donut shops and dry cleaners and then by a string of coffee/ice cream shops. He would often find his father’s car parked there when they couldn’t find him and it was an emergency.

Like the time when his mother had helped a homeless person find a place to sleep. The homeless person did not like the hotel and preferred to take shelter in her car. Michael had left to go out and found him there, keeping warm in the car. The sight of this bearded, toothless man, in his mother’s car, late at night, scared the hell out of him. He rushed inside and told his mother to lock the doors while he went to search for his father. He found his father playing cards at one of the coffee shops. When he entered, his father was surprised to see him.

“Michael, what are you doing here?”

“John is sleeping in mom’s car. He doesn’t want to go to the Old Folks Home. What are we supposed to do?”

“Did you call the police?”

“No, it’s John. I don’t want to get him arrested.”

“Okay, wait until I finish this hand.”

And so, Michael remembered how angry he was at his father for making him wait.

There were a few people in his father’s favorite coffee shop tonight. It was Halloween. His father’s friends were probably home dressed in their “good husband” costumes, handing out candy.

Michael decided not to stop somewhere to pick up a costume. It was already dark and he wouldn’t bother. He felt he could be anyone he chose to be, and he was tired of wearing masks.

He made it to The Clift by eight. Cars were streamed along the road before the bar. When Michael parked his car he was happy to walk the extra way because there weren’t enough parking spots available close by. He felt this was the proper way to go out of business, with a party. As he approached the front door of the bar, he heard the sound of loud music blaring from inside. He felt it vibrating the old place like new wine in old skins. He read the advertisement they had posted on the front door and dispersed throughout the city.

THE CLIFT’S GRAND CLOSING DAY HALLOWEEN BASH

TWO DOLLAR DRINKS! PRIZES FOR BEST COSTUME!

DRESS LIKE SOMEONE FROM THE HISTORY OF THE FALLS AND WIN MORE!

Michael opened the door and a wave of heat almost pummeled him. He then zigzagged through the crowd of costumes to the bar. Standing behind the bar was Marie, working very hard already. She was wearing a dark, straight-haired wig and the outfit of the Indian princess, Lelawala. She had seen the name in one of her mother’s diary entries and researched it. She fell in love almost immediately with the Legend of Lelawala and the Maid of the Mist.

Michael watched her for a few seconds before he made himself visible to her in the crowd. She was distracted to get everyone’s drink and she was smiling politely when

others rudely and impatiently demanded their drinks. The small dance floor in the corner was already full with people, and Michael soon found his brother Gabriel in the crowd.

He was dressed in tights and strange looking slippers. He was dressed as Blondin, the famous tightrope walker. Blondin was a daredevil who walked tightrope across the raging Niagara River. When Gabriel worked his way to Michael, he exploded on him for being late.

"Michael, where were you? And why aren't you dressed?"

"Gabriel, I'm going to help Marie behind the bar."

"Eh, Michael. She's a good bartender, way better than Dawn. If we were to stay open, she would have done good for us."

Michael knew that the only reason Gabriel said this was to cover up for his impulsive firing of Dawn. Michael smiled and hurried around the bar. Upon seeing him there, his Indian princess smiled. Her smile dispelled the hospital virus in a flash and Michael felt the adrenalin pump through him as he took a few drink orders.

Michael was happy to see almost everyone there. Hutch the horse jockey was there. So was Sara. She flirted with him and he bought her drinks. Jordan's friends had monopolized Hutch's pool table. They drank like they hadn't missed a beat in their friend's life. They drank and partied like they were making up for his absence. Michael looked around for Royce. He hoped Royce would have changed his mind and returned to pay his tab. But Michael didn't care any more. He did regret that a number of the characters were missing this night. His parents couldn't make it, and Dawn obviously wasn't going to come. And Scorpio. How Michael wished Scorpio would stroll through that door and sit at his table. He wanted Marie to find him. He wanted Marie to have a family again. He wanted her to fill that hole in her heart so that she could indulge the love she had for him. Michael feared running away with her. He feared it wasn't the right decision.

As Michael glanced over to Scorpio's table, he saw Tootz clearing other tables.

Tootz was not too happy when he heard the news that they had sold the bar. He wanted to be offered the opportunity to buy it himself, but Michael knew he had no money. June was pregnant with his child, or so Michael heard from Gabriel because he hadn't talked to Tootz in a while. Michael was still insulted by Tootz's ultimatum at

Karaoke night. Tootz had never apologized and their relationship had fizzled from then on.

When the number of drink orders settled down, Michael asked Marie if she could handle everything on her own again. She nodded with a smile, and Michael followed Tootz into the kitchen.

“Tootz?”

“Yeah, Michael. Who are you dressed up as tonight, your father?”

He wasn’t too far off, Michael thought. Michael was dressed in all black. His father’s gold necklace, the one his father had forgotten to ask for when he finally came to his senses, showed at his collar.

“Listen Tootz...”

“Michael, Michael, Michael. Are you come in here to offer me a deal I can’t refuse?” Tootz imitated Brando in *The Godfather*.

He feigned a frightened, crying face. Michael couldn’t help to laugh. By tomorrow, the lives they had grown accustomed to would change from the monotony of seeing each other every day. There was a part of Michael that would miss seeing Tootz everyday.

“Eh Tootz...”

“Yeah, Michael. What’s up?” Tootz answered always in his upbeat manner. He loaded the dishwasher with glasses. Michael was grateful for his personality and how it carried them through some difficult times.

“Do you need help finding another job?”

“No, no, Michael. I got something lined up, already. And besides, I haven’t lost this one yet. Guy bring the cheques over yet?”

Tootz alluded to the fact that Don hadn’t paid a dime yet, and he was going to take over in a few days.

“He’s supposed to bring them over tonight, actually.”

“Cutting it pretty close.”

“Yeah, he is I guess.”

“Cheer up, Michael. You’re a free agent after tonight. You should be happy. I know you never wanted to be involved in this shit in the first place, maybe your brother, but not you. You got that look in your eyes like you got better things to do.”

“Yeah, better things.”

“Hey, maybe you’ll write a book about all of us one day, Michael. You know, people got to know about this madhouse somehow. We got everything, mental disorders, whacko prostitutes, butchy bartenders, guys who think they’re connected, bisexual karaoke guys, and Royce...”, he went on rather humorously. He had a point.

“I’m going to miss working for you guys, Michael. Don’t close! Please don’t close!” He begged in a joking, over exaggerated, groveling voice.

Michael was about to leave the kitchen when Tootz grabbed his forearm. Michael felt his soapy fingers. Tootz pulled Michael in and offered him a hug.

“All the best, Michael. All the best.”

Michael left the kitchen area in a hurry to avoid crying only to find his only other official employee, Dawn, at the bar, demanding her cheque. She looked as agitated as she did the other night. Her boyfriend waited outside for her in the car. Michael had her cheque ready, but Gabriel couldn’t find it behind the bar. Michael helped him search for it, and as he did so, he saw Dawn strolling into the back to have some words with Tootz. Michael followed her there once he found the cheque and overheard her talking to Tootz.

“I can’t work for Gabriel. I can’t work for a boss that doesn’t respect me.” She didn’t know they were closing despite the advertisements all over the city. Both Michael and Tootz chose not to explain. Michael gave her the cheque, and almost by coincidence, Gabriel walked into the kitchen as she walked out. They said nothing to one another.

“She really hates me, eh?” Gabriel smirked. Michael left him to join Marie behind the bar and saw through the window, Dawn’s boyfriend’s car pulling out. Almost as quickly, he pulled in again, only two minutes later.

Dawn stormed in first, waving her cheque in the air while her very massive boyfriend followed her in this time. She immediately went to Gabriel, more nervously angry than Michael had ever seen her before. Everyone at the bar, including a stunned Marie, seemed interested.



“What’s this? You guys ripped me off one day.”

Gabriel remained very calm despite Dawn’s overly imprudent claim.

“Listen Dawn”, he said to her as politely as he could have. “I don’t know whether or not we missed a day. I’m going to check the payroll book tomorrow because I left it at home, and you will get your cheque in the mail if I find that we failed to pay you for one day.”

This didn’t appease her, perhaps because Gabriel appeared too calm and non-confrontational over the whole firing. She expected him to outright refuse her, but Gabriel couldn’t have handled it more professionally.

“Well, what am I going to do until then?” She switched her body’s balance to the other leg. She had that look in her eye like she held back some unfinished business.

“Listen Dawn, you’ll get your money. We’ve never ripped you off before, now did we? Why would we choose to now? I’m going to check the book tomorrow, like I said, so its all right, you can leave now.”

Gabriel calmly made his way behind the bar to fix himself a drink, possibly to calm his nerves, although he didn’t show much on the exterior. Dawn finally found that inkling of a provocation she could work with.

“You can’t fucking kick me out!” She screamed at him above the music so that her boyfriend could hear. Sensing trouble, he quickly came to stand behind her, like some kind of dumb henchman. Gabriel was beginning to lose his patience, and unknowingly, his temper.

“Listen Dawn, I tried to be nice. But now I’m going to ask you to leave. Get the hell out of my bar!” Gabriel ordered her rather foolishly in front of her gargantuan boyfriend. Michael stood behind the bar as well, waiting for an opportunity to enter and mediate the argument, but it was too late. Dawn’s boyfriend involved himself in the shouting match.

“You don’t talk to my girlfriend like that!” He pointed to Gabriel across the bar. He was a monster of a human, yet Gabriel stubbornly refused to retreat.

“I want you both out of my bar now!” Gabriel continued to order the both of them now. Michael made his supporting presence be known to Dawn and her boyfriend

by inching closer to Gabriel. Michael softly pushed Marie out of the way, so that she could continue to serve drinks, but he heard little action behind or in front of the bar.

Having an even worse temper, Dawn's boyfriend stomped to the side of the bar, as if he wanted to come behind it himself, to beat up Gabriel then and there. But Dawn rushed over to hold him back from behind. Michael noticed an ugly smirk on her face, like she enjoyed the escalating violence of the situation.

"Why don't you come on this side of the bar, you greasy Gino." The giant threatened Gabriel, although Michael couldn't understand the motivation for this insult. He was as much Italian as they were.

Gabriel didn't want to move. Michael could see it in his eyes and in the way his legs trembled. Gabriel was sometimes ignorant to the consequences of things, although Michael wondered as to the depth of this ignorance now. A provoked, three hundred pound mountain of muscle begged to fight with him.

Michael finally decided to officially involve himself in the dispute. He feared visiting the hospital again, a place where he had already spent the better part of a year and tonight visiting.

Michael approached the Goliath very calmly.

"Please, Mike. I think it would be best if you just left."

"I'm going to rip him apart."

"You'll have to get through me first." Michael said with a straight face. He knew he would be the smallest of obstacles to cross for this giant but he wanted to make a point.

"There is no way I'm going to let you touch my brother."

The giant laughed at Michael.

"Don't make me laugh, Michael. Get out of the way before I blow you aside. Your brother's a cocky little asshole and he's going to get what's coming to him."

His face bloated in red and visible veins pumped grossly from out of his neck and temple. His hands trembled like they wanted to get a hold of something fast.

Seeing that Michael wanted to protect his brother, and always having a soft spot for Michael, Dawn tried to pull her boyfriend back, from behind.

"Let's just go, Mike."

“I’m not going anywhere until I get a piece of him.”

“Well I’m not moving. I told you.” Michael put on his best poker face hoping that his supposed courage would incite the giant to feel sorry for him. Michael glanced back to a worried Marie, who was too distracted to take drink orders.

In a second Dawn’s boyfriend grabbed and picked Michael up onto his shoulders in some kind of wrestling move. Michael could see in flashes of white and red, the ceiling first, and then Tootz from the kitchen, upside down, as he came out screaming.

“What the hell is going on here?”

“We’re going outside!” Mike yelled at Gabriel as he motioned to carry Michael outside, tempting Gabriel with this action to follow him. It was a bumpy ride, Michael thought, being carried on his hard shoulders through the doorway and into a frisky Halloween night. Everyone seemed to follow with Gabriel, including Tootz and Marie. Dawn followed everyone out as well. She continued to try to convince her boyfriend to put Michael down. But he refused to listen to any one.

Michael worried, from his suspended position, who was watching the till inside, with everyone outside the bar outside watching the situation. Mike’s grip pressed tightly upon Michael’s arms and neck and Michael found it hard to breathe, although he could still hear a couple of cars just pulling in. He desperately hoped one was a police car. He was never so lucky.

“Put him down you son of a bitch. I’ll fight you if you put him down!” Gabriel screamed bravely, although Michael did not agree with his choice of words, which only seemed to anger Dawn’s boyfriend more. Mike finally did as Gabriel requested and when the world stopped spinning, Michael could see the fear on his brother’s complexion.

Almost immediately, Michael positioned himself in between them to stop the inevitable. Frustrated with his pestering presence, Mike pushed Michael into his brother and they both fell to the ground, one on top of the other, Gabriel on top. That visage of fear still trembled in his eyes. He looked like he was about to cry, like the time when they were kids, around three and four years of age, and Michael took the little banjo that was his to begin with, from Gabriel’s hands. Their mother had a picture of Michael

holding the banjo and Gabriel crying for it. The same look humbled his brother's face now, except they were no longer babies, and there was no banjo to take back.

Michael had an idea, although he knew it would be hard to convince his stubborn brother of it. Michael whispered it to him, not trying to move his lips.

"Do you want to live?"

"Stay out of it, Michael."

"Just do what I tell you and shut up!"

Gabriel decided to listen to his big brother. He had no other choice.

"Now listen, when we get up take off all of your clothes."

Gabriel returned Michael an incredulous stare.

"In front of all these people!"

"Just trust me and do it, right when we get up. And take off everything."

When they both got to their feet, Gabriel hesitated, so Michael began to pull his shirt off and to unbutton his pants. Following his example, and not wanting Michael to do this by himself, Gabriel discarded his clothes as well. A number of people now watched, old and new customers alike, as the owners of The Clift stripped down to their bare bodies. They took off their socks as well. A cold breeze brushed Michael's skin, creating goose pimples. He wondered whether he had shrunk down there as well.

Although the least of his concerns, Michael could hear a few giggles. Not from Tootz or Marie though, who stood in shock at this stunt. And almost as if timed, a few cars pulled in from the road to have a peak at two guys about to fight a giant in the nude. Lifting his head, Michael noticed the lighted apex of the church across the street – a white cross.

"Okay, let's fight now!" Michael put up his fists and his brother quickly did the same.

The sheer sight of two skinny naked bar owners willing to fight confused the giant. He looked to Dawn, who constantly tugged at his arms, and then to the host of other people that watched. Michael could read the look on his face. There was no way he was going to roll around with two naked guys for the purpose of fighting. Michael's teeth chattered from the cold. He looked over to his naked brother, who shivered

similarly cold as well. Their last night, and they stood naked in front of the bar, no more secrets or tensions to hide, like newborns.

The stunned look on Mike's face said it all. He retreated into a loss for words.

"What are you, chicken?" Gabriel blurted out, noticing the oncoming retreat. Michael slapped his fleshy arm. Dawn finally turned her boyfriend around to face her. She then scolded him for not listening to her in the first place. Her boyfriend finally relented to this maternal treatment. He left almost violated, it appeared, for some reason.

When they pulled out in their car, Gabriel jumped to embrace Michael and Michael embraced him back until he noticed an applauding audience staring at them. He was about to push his brother away but he didn't care anymore. He didn't care that they were naked and he was holding his brother in the air. He loved him, and he would miss him.

"We did it, we did it!" Gabriel exclaimed. Some of the customers, including Tootz, began to clap.

"Okay. Everybody inside." Michael finally recommended, still shocked that it worked.

Michael hurried to dress himself in the kitchen and Gabriel followed him back there. He was already dressed and he had nothing more to say. He embraced Michael again, who was half dressed, and squeezed him with those thick arms. In that long embrace, Michael realized how much his brother Gabriel loved him, and furthermore, how much he loved Gabriel. They had gone through a lot together over the past year. All of the arguments, all of the insults and the changes in self, approved or disapproved by the other, had funneled into this one embrace to be forgotten and forgiven.

Michael followed his brother into the bar area once he had fully dressed. The energy of the party had dwindled since the incident outside. Michael looked at his watch to see that it was nearing closing time. Marie was cleaning the bar area and the DJ was about to announce last call. Michael scanned the costumes and saw a number of familiar faces. The faces were those of people dressed in the costumes of the dead, intent on living and not dying. The faces were those of people with failures smoothed over by a glass of liquor or a bottle of beer. They were happy, if only for a deluded moment. They were happy to be free of their concerns. They were happy to be free.

Michael stepped out of the bar and walked down the street to his car. Many of the cars had already left. He went to the trunk of his car first and when he snapped the key in, he saw two traveling bags aside one another. idle.

He would leave a note to his family. He would leave them a note that he had to go away for a while. to find the missing piece of a girl's heart he had fallen in love with. He hoped they would understand. He hoped that they could handle things without him there, even if Don didn't bring the cheque tonight. He closed the trunk and listened to The Falls in the background of his dreams for Freedom. He considered the joy of falling.

## Epilogue

A young Zachary waited for the doctor in a white room. The office was a new one. Even the desk was empty. Out of curiosity and boredom, Zachary had already checked it. One colorful picture on the wall hung awkwardly and crooked in an old, elaborately designed copper frame. Zachary left his single chair, in front of the desk, to appreciate the details.

It was a painted portrait of a story he had read about, many times before. In the center of the picture was a flaming Steam Boat about to plummet The Falls of Niagara. From study of the story in his best friend's attic, Zachary had known the boat to be the American steamer Caroline. It was used to ferry men and supplies to William Lyon Mackenzie, a leader of the reform movement in Upper Canada. In 1837 Mr. Mackenzie had established headquarters on Navy Island in the Niagara River, a short distance above The Falls, seeking arms, ammunition and volunteers to aid his struggle against British Tyranny. But the Canadian militia retaliated by ejecting the crew from the Caroline, cutting the ship loose and setting it on fire. Mackenzie and his patriots quickly withdrew. In the picture, the artist had made an attempt to show the ejection of the crew. Before the flaming boat, and further down The Falls is a rowboat and a number of little men almost disappearing in the blurry detail of the mist.

Zachary felt at ease for seeing something familiar in an unfamiliar place. He felt at ease for knowing the history of a phenomenon he had grown attached to in so many ways, on so many levels. His fascinations were those of many. He felt unoriginal.

"Have a seat, Zachary," spoke a voice from behind him. The doctor had arrived.

Zachary took his former seat in front of a desk clean of books or paper or pens. It was empty, like the room with the token picture. The doctor was very young and milk faced. His hair was a thin brown and his spectacles gleamed in the florescent light.

"Zachary, I think we know why you want to kill yourself."

Zachary remained silent, but attentive.

"You suffer from Bipolar disorder. It is a mental illness involving episodes of serious mania and depression."

Zachary must have shown him a confused look because the young doctor, with the type-faced nametag, Dr. Natas Fauster, reacted.

“The person’s mood usually swings from overly “high” and irritable to sad and hopeless and then back again, with periods of normal mood in between.”

Zachary remained silent. The doctor seemed to describe something he could relate to, except that he was missing something. Zachary wanted to speak up and tell the doctor that at times he felt like someone else, like another person, maybe even two other people, lived within him as well. He wanted to say something, but he was embarrassed.

“Zachary, now I want you to answer these questions honestly, okay?”

Zachary nodded. The doctor opened a folder, pulled a pen from his lab coat pocket, and read.

“Are you extremely irritable and are you distracted often?”

“No.”

“Do you feel a decreased need for sleep?”

“No.”

“Do you have increased sexual drive?”

“No.”

“Do you often deny that anything is wrong?”

“No.”

The doctor paused before he switched the page.

“Now Zachary, please, be honest. I have a few more to ask you.”

Zachary nodded.

“Are you persistently sad, anxious, or do you experience empty moods.”

“Yes.”

“Do you often feel guilt, worthlessness, or helplessness?”

“Yes.”

“Is your energy decreased? Do you have a feeling of fatigue or of being “slowed down”?”

“Yes.”

“Have you experienced loss of appetite?”

“Yes.”

“Do you often entertain thoughts of death or suicide?”

“Yes.”



The doctor made a revision to one of the papers and closed the folder.

“Zachary, we are going to help you here. I promise you.”

“But I want to go home. I’m afraid.”

“Zachary, in order for you to go home, you have to get better first. We are going to start you with medication, and if that fails, we will explore an experimental form of shock therapy, which I, personally, am helping to develop. I promise you Zachary, that you will get better. Now, a nurse will be in shortly to show you to your room.”

The doctor mechanically took his folder and exited the room.

Zachary returned to the picture. He returned to the picture and imagined himself to be one of the falling crewmen from the plunging Caroline Steam Boat. He wanted to return home to find the life he had known. He wanted to hear the water falling. He wanted the simplicity of walking Amaris home from school. He remembered one walk in particular, through a sporadically developed suburbia. In the distance and beyond the gradual decline of the escarpment was the tip of Amaris’ old house. The sounds of their steps almost reached unison. With every step, more of her house and more of The Falls could be seen beyond the green horizon.

“Amaris?”

“Yes. Zachary. What is it?”

“How did you know I was going to do it? I mean I woke up real early so that no one would know.”

“I don’t know if you’ll believe me if I tell you.”

“Of course I will. I want to know.”

“Well, I couldn’t sleep the entire night. I don’t know why. I was rolling and turning. And then I was hot, and then I was cold and clammy. So I finally gave up on sleep and got up. I washed my hair and dressed for school because I had nothing better to do. And then I went downstairs to grab a glass of water. When I did, I felt a sharp pain in my chest. And then I got real nervous, like I was having an anxiety attack. I had to relax somehow so I went back to bed, but I still couldn’t sleep. I went upstairs in the attic to look at the sky through the telescope. The sunrise always relaxes me. And when I did, and while I was waiting for the sun to rise, I lowered the telescope and saw you at the

rock. I rushed out of my house and ran, hoping that you wouldn't jump. I was so afraid, Zachary. And thank God, that I wasn't too late."

"Yeah, too late."

"Don't you see, Zachary? It was meant to be that I found you."

"Do you think I need to see that doctor in Hamilton, Amaris, like my mother said?"

"No, cause you're never going to try that again, right?"

"I don't know if I will, Amaris. I really don't know what it is. When I'm feeling so low, I get attracted to the Falls. It's like there is someone inside of me I don't really know, but he is still there, and he wants to jump in. I hear sounds from The Falls, and the sounds come together, like music, and then I feel like I've heard it before, like in a dream, or another life. You think someone's cursed me?"

Zachary kicked some stones out of his path.

"What makes you feel like somebody else, Zachary? You can tell me. I promise. I won't tell anybody, cross my heart."

"I don't know what it is. I'm being honest with you. It's like inside, and I can't find it, but I can still feel it. I can feel the pull of someone different inside of me, and sometimes I agree with him, and he's nice to listen to, like he's never wrong."

"It's okay, Zachary. We're going to find whoever it is, and that's who we're going to throw in The Falls, not you."

Amaris swung her arm around Zachary's bony little shoulders. He liked the weight of her body on him. He liked when she touched him. He was a fool for her affection.

"You're a wonderful dancer, you know."

He smiled and wondered whether this was the first time she had lied to him.

## VITA AUCTORIS

Dean Serravalle was born in 1973 in Thorold, Ontario. He graduated from Denis Morris Secondary School in 1992. From there he went on to Brock University where he obtained a B.A. in English Literature in 1997. He is currently a candidate for a Master's Degree in English and Creative Writing at the University of Windsor and hopes to graduate in Spring 2000. He has published two short stories, one in Zygote Magazine and the other in Urban Graffiti.